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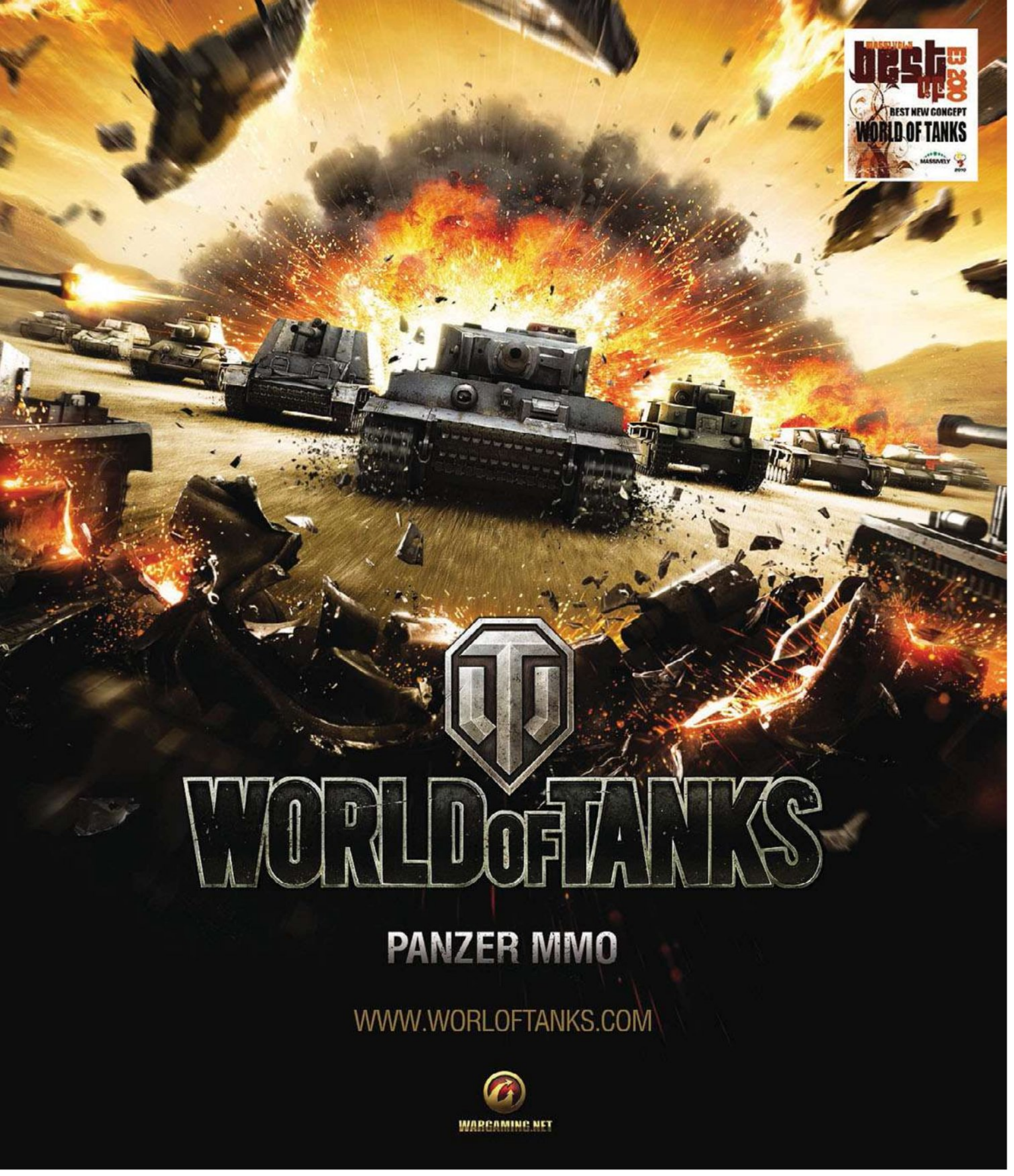
Following all of the talk from Japanese studios about how they're looking to the west for inspiration in an effort to put the region back on the game-making map, it's a pleasure to present an issue of **Edge** headlined by three Japanese productions that feel like they're being driven by their makers' imaginations, and not some desire to tick boxes, match templates or meet audience expectations.

Fitting in certainly wasn't on the agenda when From Software made 2009's *Demon's Souls*, a PlayStation 3 action RPG so unremittingly punishing that it felt oddly out of time, like some kind of protest against the kind of modern-day console games that bestow achievements on players for somehow managing the feat of avoiding death via electrocution while plugging in their consoles. Naturally, the team's next game, *Dark Souls*, is going to be even more challenging. Our report from the studio, which begins on p50, also details the other avenues being explored as From Software prepares to aim an armour-plated knee at the groin of Xbox 360 adventurers this time around, too.

If *Dark Souls*' approach is a bold one, at least it has a proven precursor on which to build. Ignition's *El Shaddai: Ascension Of The Metatron* (see p64) is an original IP which also happens to be the first project directed by Takeyasu Sawaki, whose previous game-making experience has focused more on aesthetics, most famously with *Okami*. Oh, and it also takes as its inspiration a religious text. Given today's production climate, it's not easy to envisage the meeting in which the game was given the green light – until, perhaps, you see it come alive on the screen.

Finally, there's *The Last Guardian*, from Fumito Ueda's Team Ico, which produced *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, and from which so much is therefore expected. Despite being due later this year, secrecy still surrounds much of the new game, but on p58 we get to uncover some firm details and learn about its inspiration. Like *Dark Souls* and *El Shaddai*, its refusal to use the likes of *Gears Of War* as a touchstone appears to work in its favour.




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Printed in the UK by William Gibbons.
Covers printed by Grange, Brighton, East Sussex.
Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT.
(0207 429 4000)

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SOFTWARE

Apple's great app takeover: phase two

With the launch of the Mac App Store, will Apple revolutionise software purchases for the personal computer the way it did with the smartphone?

For such a massive global enterprise, Apple moves at a surprisingly nimble pace: the tech giant announces something when it's ready and ships it soon after. So it was with the Mac App Store, announced in late October 2010 and launched in the first week of January. Transplanting the iOS software marketplace – which has hosted more than ten billion downloads – to a line of computers that until recently were the cornerstone of Apple's business could be seen as simply the obvious thing to do. In fact, it's far more than that.

The process of downloading and installing software remains daunting to less savvy users: install paths and advanced setup options to configure, EULAs to accept and toolbars to decline. In carrying over to the Mac not just the look and feel but, crucially, the ease of use of the iOS App Store, has Apple just done for the home computer what it did for the smartphone? We talk to some of the developers whose games have enjoyed early success on the service to find out.

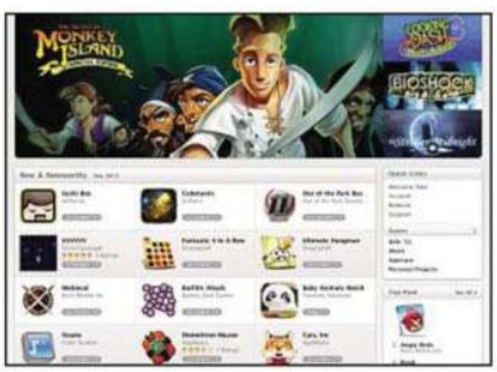




Rob Murray (left) is founder and CEO of Melbourne studio Firemint, whose *Flight Control* has had almost 4m downloads; Ville Heijari is 'bird whisperer' at *Angry Birds* dev Rovio

Transplanting the App Store to a line of computers that until recently were the cornerstone of Apple's business could be seen as an obvious move, but it's far more than that

"As a consumer I love it, because it's so simple and integrated," says **Rob Murray**, CEO of Melbourne developer Firemint. The company's hit game *Flight Control* has been downloaded almost four million times from the iOS store, with *Flight Control HD* quickly scaling the upper echelons of the Mac App Store's Top Paid chart. "As a new Mac user, migrating from PC just two years ago, one of the things I was uncertain about was how to install software. Coming from a PC, I just wasn't comfortable with the idea of not installing. With the App Store, it's a really smooth process and I have a sense of confidence that it has fully downloaded and installed my app."



While the iOS App Store's enormous library can mean sorting the wheat from the chaff is arduous, a Mac's larger display gives an iTunes-like chance to point customers in the right direction

At a programming level, a Mac obviously has much in common with iOS devices, but Murray warns fellow iOS developers who are considering the switch that the two are far from the same. "While you can program it like an iPhone, it's a fully featured computer," he notes. "You should spend time making your game work elegantly with the form factor: the hi-res screen, keyboard, touchpad, mouse and so on. You also have a dynamic multitasking environment and a range of different performance profiles and screen resolutions."

For *Angry Birds* developer Rovio, the decision to release its wares on the Mac App Store was never in question. With the game having now been downloaded over 75 million times across all platforms, and its status as poster child for iOS gaming, there simply had to be an *Angry Birds*

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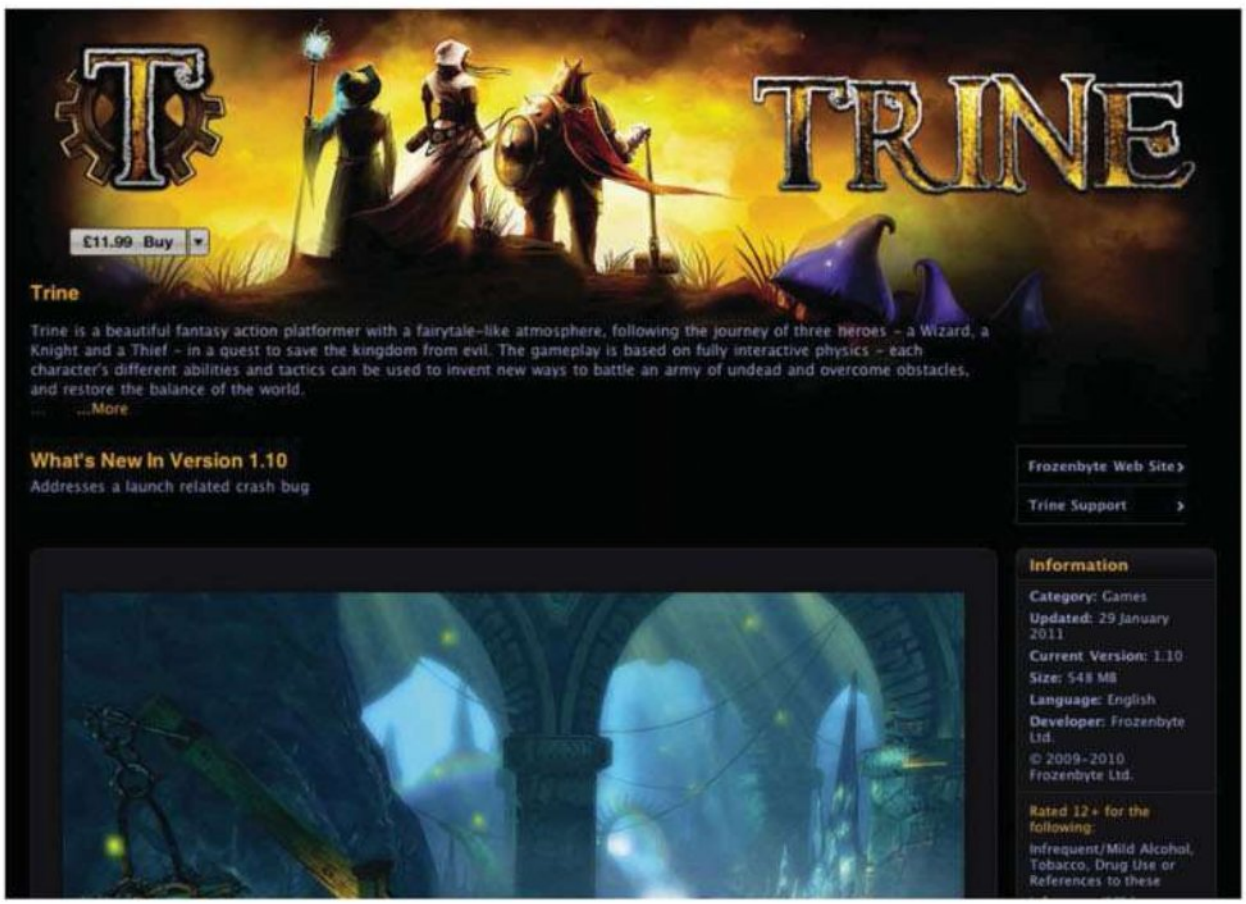
iteration available on day one. There was, and it instantly shot to the summit of the Top Paid chart. Like Murray, Rovio's **Ville Heijari** sees similarities and differences with iOS development: "With the different versions of iPhones, we have issues of scalability, something that's pretty much a given with computers. On the Mac side of things we face a wider array of different machines than iOS, but a far less diverse one than with PCs."

For predominantly mobile developers such as Firemint and Rovio, the Mac is obviously a far more powerful platform. "Compared to what we've published so far, we now have the luxury of using more space," says Heijari. "This will mean richer visuals and more opportunities for audio. Mac and PC will be the first platforms for what we think of as the full *Angry Birds* experience – a richer world with deeper storytelling opportunities."

For PopCap – which has been releasing Mac versions of its games for some time – the Mac App Store provides a convenient means of selling its products via a marketplace that, by grace of being built into the operating system, is available to every Mac user. "The Macintosh platform has always been important to PopCap, so this alignment was fairly natural for us," says **Rex Sikora**, the firm's director of channel programs. "We were very pleased that our Mac games worked as-is, and only required some tweaks to be Mac Store-friendly."

Jonathan Blow's 2008 XBLA hit *Braid* was ported to the Mac by Hothead Games. At the time of writing, it's the Top Paid app on the Mac App Store, thanks no doubt to its £2.99 price tag. While aggressive pricing strategies often nudge games up the Paid chart, *Braid* is also seventh in the Top Grossing chart – sandwiched between Apple's *Numbers* and *Keynote*, both of which cost £11.99 – meaning it's selling in significant numbers. While Blow clearly has plenty of incentive to embrace the Mac App Store, he prefers to look at the bigger picture.

He believes the Mac App Store is just the latest in the ever-increasing number of platforms that enable developers to release their games independently. "Between platforms like the Mac App Store, Steam and the iPad, and big



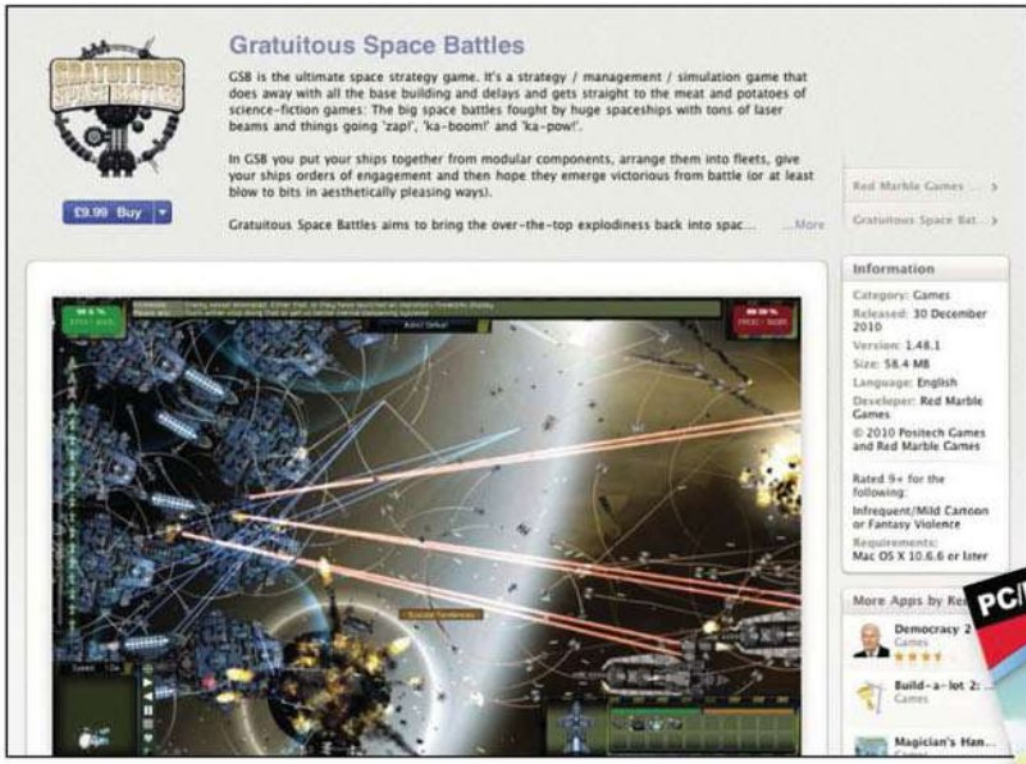




While time-shifting puzzler *Braid* (above) from Jonathan Blow (top) was a surprising sight at the summit of the Top Paid chart, heavy discounting is often met with similar results. At £11.99, Frozenbyte's *Trine* (left) may never reach those heights, but it's cheaper on the App Store than on Steam

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With multinational publishers and indie developers sharing the same space, the App Store is as close to a true software meritocracy as we've seen. *Democracy 2*, from *Gratuitous Space Battles* (above) developer Positech, was turned down by Steam, but is on the App Store

promotions like the Humble Indie Bundle, an independent developer can make plenty of sales without trying to get on to the console platforms like XBLA and PSN," he says. "It's a huge pain to go through the approval and certification process for one of the consoles, but Steam, Mac and the iPad are much more lightweight."

Blow has finally acknowledged the elephant in the room. Steam launched for Mac last May, and Valve may end up feeling like it has had the rug pulled out from under it. Valve's director of business development, **Jason Holtman**, certainly feels the firm has done a lot of Apple's groundwork for it, by proving that the audience exists. "We've opened up a new avenue," he says. "There's this wide range of gamers out there and they go across platforms; they just think of themselves as gamers. [Before Mac Steam launched] it was a smaller, unknown market – developers weren't really thinking about it. Now they can actually see the market, and it's all there. You only make games when there are folks to make games for. We've proven that the target is bigger than [Apple] thought."

"Will sales go up as more people upgrade their Macs, and as the App Store helps the Mac become a more popular platform? Or will they go down as the initial excitement fades?"

Microsoft isn't likely to view the Mac App Store as a particularly welcome development, either. While Windows has the userbase, the comparative ease of developing for the Mac – avoiding what Blow describes as "the somewhat disgraceful stability and compatibility problems that happen on PCs" – and the Mac App Store's general ease of use will spark some concern in Redmond. Apple is now theoretically in the position to take a 30 per cent slice of all Mac digital software sales. In a clear signal that it sees Apple as a legitimate threat to its business, Microsoft made moves in January to block Apple's 2008 attempt to trademark the phrase 'App Store', filing a motion for summary judgement at the United States Patent and Trademark Office. The case made the argument that the phrase is a generic term that competitors should be free to use. Citing 25 separate cases as precedent and using Apple CEO Steve Jobs' own words as evidence – in an earnings call last October, Jobs referred to Google's own mobile marketplace, Android Market, as an "app store" – the filing is now on hold, pending a hearing at the Trademark Trial and Appeal Board.

Holtman states that it's far too early to say whether the initial interest that saw a million Mac apps downloaded in the first 24 hours after the platform's launch will be sustained in the long term. "Apple are obviously very good at apps," he notes, "and it's good to have folks selling lots of things, but in terms of the client, their content, the way people use it, it's really too early to sit and say, 'It's going to look like this, or it's going to do that'."

Blow agrees: "Will sales go up as more people upgrade their Macs, get used to the App Store, and as the App Store helps the Mac become a more popular platform? Or will they go down as the initial excitement of the App Store fades? I have no idea."

It is still early days for the Mac App Store. The hacking group Hackulous claimed to have cracked the service's DRM before the service had even launched – saying it would unleash its work "when we feel [the service] has a lot of crap on it" – which may impact on sales, and only time will tell what happens once the thrill of the new subsides. But buying and installing software on a modern personal computer has never been so easy, and with both Steam and the App Store, the Mac can finally be considered a legitimate gaming platform with a sizeable audience. As Blow puts it: "Apple has never seemed to take games very seriously. Maybe the iPhone and the iPad changed that, and they're realising that games can be good for them. I hope that's true!

"Videogames now are a different thing to what they were in 1995, and so this may also be part of why Apple might like them more now. The Mac can now be taken more seriously as a target platform for game developers. The numbers and sales are clearly high enough to justify the effort involved."



Bye bye, boxes?

You've got used to downloading music from iTunes, but could Apple soon be leading the digital software pack?

While it has long been accepted that the future of software sales is digital distribution, few expected Apple to get there first. Yet according to website MacRumors, work has already begun to eliminate boxed software from Apple Stores. The firm is to introduce in-store support dubbed Personal Set-up, where staff will walk customers through the setup of email and iTunes accounts and, crucially, "walk [them] through the Mac App Store" – fuelling suspicion that Apple's ultimate aim is to clear its shelves of boxed software, replacing them with smaller, higher-margin items, such as its own devices and accessories.

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HARDWARE

A new dimension

3DS has arrived, but how well does the effect that wowed at tradeshows hold up at home?

Forget that 3.53-inch, autostereoscopic screen for a moment, and consider the fact that, without it, Nintendo's 3DS is quite familiar. Three iterations of the old DS hardware have refined the blueprint of how Nintendo's dual-screen consoles should look and feel, and 3DS is simply another step in that process. Its edges have been tapered (to ease opening the lid) and, viewed from the side, the unit appears as three 'layers' stacked upon one another. But these are minor, almost cosmetic, upgrades – the kind of refinements you see from a company perfecting a design, not reinventing it.

Open the case and the most obvious addition is the new circle pad, which has bumped the dependable D-pad farther down the unit's left side. Springy enough to snap back when you release it, but with enough resistance to allow for precise movement, its concave surface suits the thumb better than the PSP equivalent. Less obvious are the three buttons below the touchscreen: Start, Select and the new Home button are almost flush with the surface, which makes for tidy design but means, on occasion, pausing games in a hurry can be awkward. At first, you'll keep glancing down to be sure your thumb has found its target.

Pushing the Home button at any time brings up 3DS's clean, uncluttered OS – which is as integrated with the console as 360's dashboard or Sony's XMB. It has to be, too, as the platform's increased online functionality means that being able to quickly enter friends lists and read notifications – even in-game – is an essential feature. Functions such as these, which don't end whatever software is currently running, appear as a series of touch-activated icons at the top of the home screen, alongside a well-meaning but rather superfluous option to jot down digital Post-it notes relating to whatever game you're currently playing.

It's a simple-to-use interface, and one that's complemented by menu screens including some of the more subtle, undeniably eye-pleasing uses of 3D we've seen

Software such as the camera app, the Mii plaza and the download store appear as a scrollable row of chunky icons which recall the Wii menu's channels. It's a simple-to-use interface, and one that's complemented by menu screens including some of the more subtle, undeniably eye-pleasing uses of 3D we've seen. Still, trying to load one application straight from another does mean a few seconds' pause.

But of course it's all about that screen. We were worried that the extended time spent peering into the console's 3D display would reveal limitations which our earlier tests missed, and while there have been no massive disappointments, one thing's for certain: few people experience the screen in the same way.

The 3D depth slider is an absolute necessity, and everyone who uses the console seems to settle on a unique comfort level. A handful can view the image at full whack without a problem, but many turn the slider to around the halfway mark. While those who can't resolve the fully turned-up image might be troubled by the niggling feeling they're getting less three-dimensional bang for their buck, we've yet to find someone unimpressed by the image they settle upon – and we've noticed our own tolerance increasing with time.

Importantly, even the merest hint of depth can enhance the visuals of a game by distinctly separating the component parts of the image. And it's this clarity – rather than the gimmicky, popping-out-of-the-screen moments – which is what keeps you from turning the 3D off.

Some games will test your eyes more than others. *Pilotwings Resort* asks players to divide their focus between a vehicle in the foreground and distant landing pads and targets, and was the

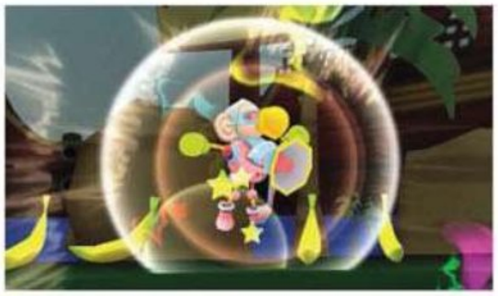




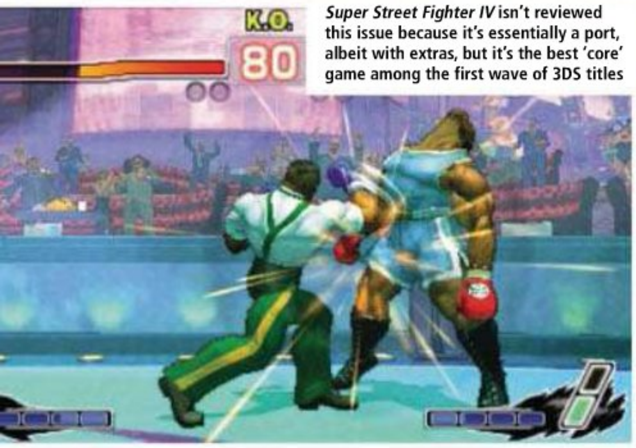
The dividing of touchscreen controls and the 3D effect between the two screens has required the splitting of your interactions with, and the image of, your pet in *Nintendogs + Cats* (left). It will be interesting to see how other games manage the gap between the two. It's hard to imagine a stylus controlling *Pilotwings Resort* (above) as well as the new circle pad, however

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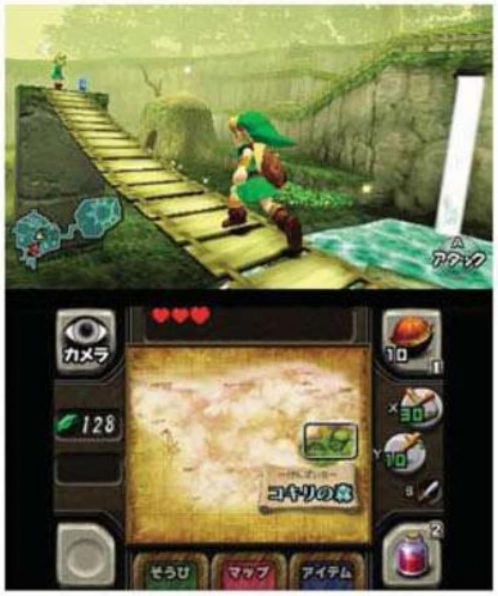




Either by accident or design, most of the games released at launch – including *SSFIV* and *Super Monkey Ball 3D* (left) – are designed around short rounds of play. The extended sessions encouraged by the likes of *Ocarina Of Time 3D* (below left) will no doubt prove more demanding to certain eyes, encouraging some depth slider tweaking



Super Street Fighter IV isn't reviewed this issue because it's essentially a port, albeit with extras, but it's the best 'core' game among the first wave of 3DS titles



OUT THERE



YOU ARE THE LAW



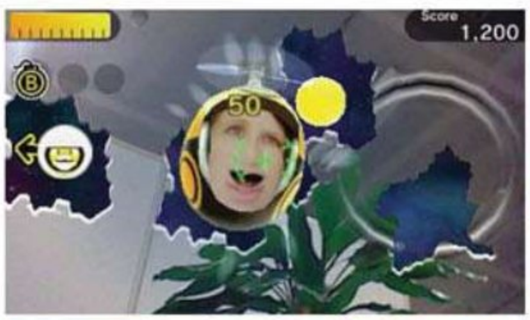
Capcom's *Ace Attorney* series is about to burst into the real world with the launch of an amusement park attraction. Set to debut at Sega's Joypolis in Tokyo this spring, for ¥600 (£4.50) customers take on the role of Miles Edgeworth within a specially designed set. Wannabe sleuths will be given a notebook, and use terminals scattered throughout the attraction to gather information as they attempt to resolve the situation and discover who committed the crime. A strong moral compass is mandatory; scruffy macs, sharp suits and pointed fingers are optional.

● tinyurl.com/joypolis

game which led to most players bumping the slider down a notch. When the 3D 'breaks', the effect is hardly disastrous – usually manifesting as a sudden awareness that you're looking at two images rather than one, or a strange inability to focus on the screen – and is easily fixed by adjusting your viewing angle or nudging down the slider.

But even without the 3D effect, this is powerful hardware. The top screen's resolution may not rival an iPhone 4's astonishing display, but this is a clear step beyond DS quality. Of all the launch titles, it's *Super Street Fighter IV 3D* which proves the console's technical muscle, arriving on the handheld as a remarkably faithful reworking of the brilliant PS3/360/arcade original.

Novel, capable and unique, 3DS breaks from Nintendo's recent tradition of prizing innovative interaction over arresting visuals. Having conquered the home console and handheld markets with technically modest products sporting ambitiously quirky interfaces, the new handheld marks a shift in priority back to presentation. And if the industry-wide preoccupation with motion control instigated by Wii offers any indication, get ready for more autostereoscopic imitators than you can shake a stylus at.





The camera is a pleasant diversion, though pictures can only be switched between fully 3D or 2D – small adjustments to the slider have no effect. A 3D picture is a strange thing – people tend to look like cardboard cutouts a few feet in front of the background



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While conspiracy is still at the game's heart, the topic requires a refresh, having since been propelled into the mainstream by the likes of Dan Brown. New conspiracies have appeared in the interim, too, but DeMarle won't be drawn on whether they're included

Writing the revolution

We unpick the nuances of the Deus Ex prequel's dark, engaging futurism with Eidos Montreal

Deus Ex's grim cyberpunk future was strung with intrigue, embroiling the player in a treacherous world of unparalleled depth and unusual darkness. With the forthcoming prequel, *Human Revolution*, promising to recapture that extremely rare complexity, we talk to the game's narrative designer **Mary DeMarle** about crafting a new conspiracy to pre-empt the plots of the original game.

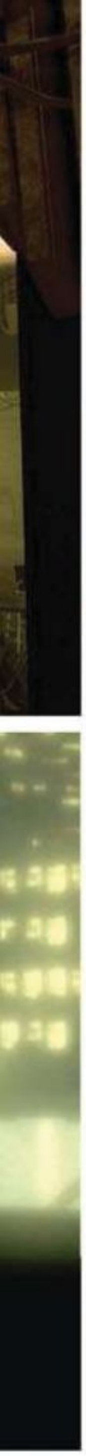
In the opening cinematic to *Human Revolution* we hear a shadowy cabal discussing the fate of certain characters. Are we right in thinking there are some familiar voices there?
You *might* be right! But I'm not going to go any further than that.

If they *were* familiar voices, how far can you revisit [or pre-visit] *Deus Ex*'s characters without hitching yourself to their fate?
I'm often asked: "If you're going to write a story that allows me to change the future, how can you make it a prequel when I already know what happens in 2052?" My answer to that is: "The world can change overnight". When 9/11 happened, the world changed overnight. And we have 25 years between our story [in *Human Revolution*] and the story of *Deus Ex* to make that happen. At the same time – and maybe this is more what you were trying to get at – the original *Deus Ex* does have specific characters that we want to touch upon and events that we'd like to foreshadow, and we have to do that very carefully, because we don't want to contradict what is canon. But, at the same time, with this story that's 25 years before, what struck me was thinking, where was I 25 years ago? I was in college or high school, or maybe younger – I don't want to date myself here! There's not a whole lot I could have been doing 25 years ago, so which characters in *Deus Ex* could really have been a factor? We have to take all of that into consideration.

"We never want to say that one way is wrong and one is right – because we're ultimately asking who you agree with. Do you think human augmentation is dangerous?"

By the end of the first few levels, a number of factions have stepped into the light – how do they break down in comparison to the political lines in *Deus Ex*?
I wouldn't say that we tried to make a direct correlation. We didn't try to ask: 'Who are our Templars and who are our Illuminati?' But at the very beginning, when we started creating this, we did identify all the players – be they innocent dupes, or red herrings or conspirators. We looked at the sort of conspiracy we were creating and the issues we were exploring, and tried to work out what groups would exist and what their beliefs might be.

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Human Revolution **has shed some of its Matrix-inspired overtones, which DeMarle identifies as too obviously rooted in the '90s. Instead, there's reference to renaissance imagery – best expressed through the sumptuous clothing of the well-to-do**



"Your investigation can take you in several directions at once," says DeMarle (above). "You can complete objectives out of order, and in the city environments there are a lot of side-quests, which may possibly shed light on the groups involved in the world"

In the hands-on [see p30], you saw Sarif Industries – a corporation which creates these mechanical augmentations – and it's led by David Sarif, who as a CEO is trying to make money, but also believes that this is where the future lies and human augmentation is good for mankind. Then you have the company being attacked by several sides, one of which is the terrorist organisation Purity First. They believe the sort of research that goes on at Sarif Industries is dangerous, and bad for mankind – maybe some of them believe this on religious grounds, and others for less noble reasons. There's a whole bunch of complex issues, but there's no attempt to emulate the Templars from *Deus Ex*, because we're dealing with a new story.

Have you tried to make the factions relatively symmetrical, as they were in *Deus Ex*, with an equal weight in the narrative? Is that a game design or narrative design choice?

Part of what we're trying to do with the narrative is to get the player to explore these issues, so it's never a case of black and white – there are always shades of grey. You can look at these groups and uncover their motivations, and perhaps some of them are being used by other people, but we never want to say that one way is wrong and one way is right – so we emulate *Deus Ex* in that respect, because we're ultimately asking who you agree with. Do you think that human augmentation is dangerous? Or do you think it's a good thing? Does it need to be more tightly controlled? And we have groups who represent all of those different views.

In *Deus Ex*, the protagonist, JC Denton, was seemingly disliked by all of his colleagues, and now Adam Jensen appears to get stick from everyone as well. Was that a conscious narrative technique?

You're the first to point that out, and I've never even realised it myself. But, uh, yeah! JC Denton was the new man, and everyone was jealous of him. With our storyline, we don't have Jensen coming in as the new man, but there's an element in his past that causes everyone to question whether he's really the best man for the job. The reason that we'd choose to do that would be to make a more interesting character out of Jensen – we wanted to make him a blue-collar hero. He's not your James Bond, special forces type, but just your average, everyday hero. And when you look at it that way, you have to ask, what is an everyman experience? I think all of us have felt under-appreciated at some point, or felt that people jump to conclusions about us, and we have to deal with that. So it wasn't a conscious attempt to emulate *Deus Ex*, but rather to create a character we can all relate to.

Adding to the sense of Jensen's isolation, there's a more or less openly hostile relationship with your operator, Pritchard. What lay behind that decision?

The decision came, once again, from starting from the standpoint of an everyman. We've always had that experience of working with someone you just don't like, but having to work with them anyway. You can respect someone's professionalism, but at the end of the day you can still say: "You're a dick". It's all part of the human experience.

Newswire



The Sarien Re-encounter

Activision is at risk of losing its reputation as current industry bogeyman. Not only has it permitted the release of unofficial *King's Quest* continuation *The Silver Lining*, but it has now sanctioned fansite Sarien.net's emulation of Sierra's classic adventure games. Sarien began life as a retrogame chatroom, but is now recreating entire games like *Space Quest* in HTML5 – with *multiplayer*. Activision's stipulation is that Sarien publish only the first instalment in each series, and take down its iPad versions, so perhaps we should watch out for Sierra's titles on the App Store.

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INTERVIEW



Reality check

Games offer plenty of alternatives to the real world – but do we want them to try to fix it?

In her new book, Reality Is Broken, **Jane McGonigal** (above) argues that the rules, rewards and feedback offered by modern videogames can be used to make the world a happier and more productive place. We sit down with her to learn more.

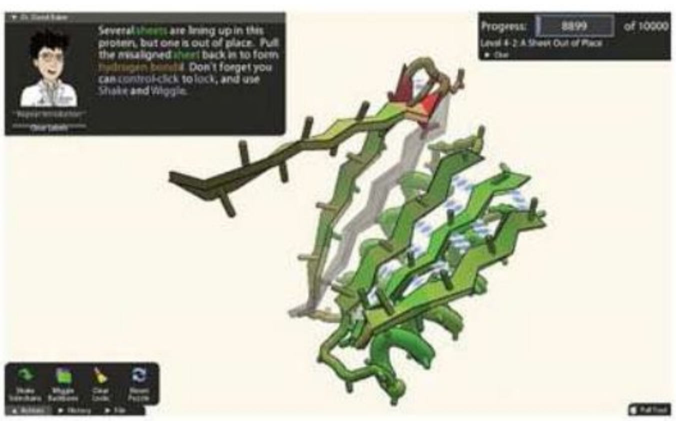
You've suggested that both play and happiness come down to work – that humans ultimately need toil in order to enjoy themselves. Isn't that a fairly depressing notion?
I think there's another way to look at that, which is fascinating and awesome. Our natural inclination is not to be lazy or chilled-out – our natural inclination is to be activated and engaged. We're drawn to motivation and curiosity. I think this is great news.

You begin the book by explaining that there's currently a mass exodus from reality going on, as people steadily escape into game worlds – is this different from the escape into daytime TV that's been going on for over 60 years?
There's a lot of anxiety about how much time people are spending escaping into games. I think there's something interesting about the fact that nobody cared when people were spending five hours a day watching soap operas. It comes down to the fact that suddenly we've got a much more diverse demographic with games – we have men with full-time jobs, young people. It's apparently OK for people who don't have jobs to watch TV, but suddenly we have people who are gainfully employed seeking engagement in the game world.

There's also the intensity of it. For people who don't play games, there's such a gap in their understanding. They don't understand how it's possible to be so motivated by something with no real-world consequences. You don't get that intense emotional state that games deliver from reading a book or watching TV, so I think people are confused.

So, if we're all escaping the real world, how can games fix reality?
The first thing for people who already spend time playing games to do is recognise that the skills they're tapping into – to be resilient and cooperative – are real powers that they have even when they're not playing. The most dangerous idea we have about games is that they're escapist and have no bearing on who we are.

Partly, this book is written to say to gamers: you can use these skills in your real life. We shouldn't be telling gamers that there's something wrong with them. We should be saying that there's something awesome about them. That's why there's science in the book that shows, for



Games such as *FoldIt* harness players' skills to help solve scientific problems that computers struggle with. The applications include HIV, cancer and Alzheimer's research

SOUND BYTES

"I didn't get the chance to lobby the Treasury directly on the videogames tax break. I lobbied indirectly and made my views known [but] I am quite low down on the food chain."
UK culture minister **Ed Vaizey** reveals a worrying lack of influence for the UK industry's sole link to Parliament

"We can never win. We launch with a Mario game and people say: 'You always launch with Mario, what else is coming? Where's *Kid Icarus*? Where's *Pilotwings*?' We launch with *Pilotwings* and people say: 'Where's Mario?' So we can never win."
One question, **Reggie Fils-Aime**: where's *Balloon Kid*?

"I actually think that one of the biggest risks today in our industry are these inexpensive games that are candidly disposable from a consumer standpoint. Some of those games are overpriced at one or two dollars but that's a whole different story. *Angry Birds* is a great piece of experience, but that is one compared to thousands of other pieces of content that for one or two dollars I think actually create a mentality for the consumer that a piece of gaming content should only be two dollars."
More from **Reggie**, who presumably hasn't been in a hurry to sign up *Fart Machine 3D*

"We consider all kinds of achievements from across the gaming world for inclusion in the Guinness World Records Gamer's Edition, and sometimes that means calculating all the possible configurations of a mouse."
Guinness World Records gaming editor **Gaz Deaves**, who must skip to the office some mornings

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Despite their heavy focus on achievements and points, McGonigal argues that the appeal of *COD* and *Halo* lies in the gameplay, not their rewards

example, that people who play music games are more likely to pick up an instrument.

Also, we can play games that connect to real-world problems. I'm encouraging gamers to spend one out of every ten game hours playing a game that solves a real-world problem, like *FoldIt*, the protein-folding game.

I think *FoldIt* is the best example of what I'm talking about. Firstly, it's clearly playable as a videogame. You play it online in a 3D environment, and it's about things gamers are already good at: seeing a problem from a number of points of view, and not giving up when stumped. It's a game, but at the end you're hopefully helping to make breakthroughs in medicine for cancers and Alzheimer's disease.

> **"Gamers need to recognise that the skills they're tapping into – to be resilient and cooperative – are real powers that they have even when they're not playing"**

Critics of this kind of gamification argue that it focuses on extrinsic rewards – levels, points, achievements – while ignoring what's genuinely great about games, and that it's ultimately manipulative. Are you worried that the kind of things you're promoting can become tools to weaponise drudgery?

But only for so long. The good news is that we know that gamers aren't extrinsically motivated by points. They're intrinsically motivated by an engaging activity: story, art, missions. If you look at reviews, people aren't saying *Call Of Duty* is the best game ever because of the points they earn – they like the gameplay. Gamification isn't going to work if it doesn't focus on the gameplay.

It's interesting you mention *COD*, because it seems to use extrinsic motivations very manipulatively. In your book, you briefly touch on the possible dangers of game designers knowing so much about the psychology of positive thought, and say developers of *WOW* and other online titles seem very worried about this. Rest rewards aside, are they really doing much about it?

I think the question is: are you wrapping the system around something that matters? *Warcraft* is an interesting example, as it wraps that around social relationships, or cooperation skills, planning skills. Wrapping metrics around a game like that is less scary to me than a singleplayer game that's just busywork.

COD is a tougher one, but it's still about stress relief, being able to deal with your own anger and anxiety. The US army had this great study saying that soldiers who play a few hours of *COD* or *Halo* daily have the lowest levels of depression and fewer suicide attempts. As long as we're focusing on that, I'm not scared about the use of these metrics to keep people engaged.

When it's empty and vacuous, it can be a trick. It's also worth remembering that studies show when you're playing more than 28 hours a week, it can have negative impacts on your real-life goals and social relationships: game designers should encourage fewer than 28 hours a week of play. As games get more related to real life, maybe that number will budge.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Founded by three female gamers, Fat, Ugly Or Slutty publishes screengrabs of the "creepy, disturbing, insulting, degrading and/or just plain rude messages" sent to (mostly female) players during their voyages through the murky waters of online gaming.

From sexist stereotypes to explicit sexual requests, the site is rapidly building a portfolio of the least savoury – and weirdest – messages sent to unsuspecting inboxes. A threat involving time travel, a dinosaur egg and the mauling of a rival gamer's carcass has to be read to be believed.

FUOS serves the dual purpose of highlighting the depraved nature of the venomous comments posted by verbal attackers, and exposing their gamertags for all to see (and avoid).

Site:
Fat, Ugly Or Slutty
URL:
www.fatuglyorslutty.com

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ONLINE

Flash with anger

Mischievous design duo Wefail make plain the perils of the Flash game

In the increasingly diverse online gaming space, it can sometimes be hard to tell where web design ends and game development begins. Two-man studio Wefail has been circling this nebulous boundary for the better part of two decades, making its name with sprawling websites that dispense with the stuffy corporate standards of navigation. These are often unsettling experiences – hypertextual toyboxes which unfold to reveal their treasures only by the user's playful experimentation. Wefail's most recent effort marks a clearer move into game territory, however: a browser-based platformer called *Die Hipster* (thathipster.com) in which you chaperone a trend-obsessed 20-something to his grisly demise, collecting trophies along the way. Its venomous humour is pitted against a collage of papery cutouts and cutesy puppetry.

"We'd love to be independent from chasing clients," says Hughes. "Our dream would be to take *Die Hipster* on to console. If there are any console development studios reading, get in touch!"



Having lived through the design movement that transformed the web from static HTML pages into deep, involving experiences, Wefail says another change is now taking place – one which threatens such elaborate Flash-driven sites.

"I think in the early days there were a lot of unskilled kids making cool little things to stick on the net and share," says co-founder **Martin Hughes**, looking back to the arrival of Flash in the '90s. "It was an app that was easy to pick up and have interactive animation working within a couple of minutes, accessible to people who had no past with the complexities of code. For a time there was a balance between kids making great independent work in Flash, and huge corporations making rich media ads for whatever it was they needed to sell. Unfortunately, today, there's hardly anything but the latter being made."

"But this is like anything else," says Hughes' colleague **Jordan Stone**. "Look at how exciting rock and roll was in the beginning. Since everything is so *fast* now, our arc into banality and corporatisation just happened over a much more compressed timeframe."

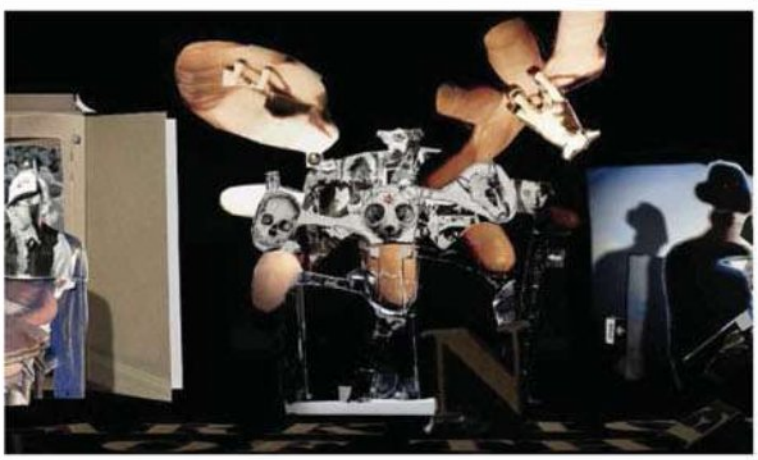
Even those rich media ads are fewer in number. Intricate web experiences like Wefail's Dark Night Of The Soul – a sonically and graphically dense site promoting the collaborative album by Danger Mouse, Sparklehorse and David Lynch, among others – are now a rare breed.

"It's definitely in decline, in my opinion," says Hughes. "Primarily due to the abundance of handheld platforms that don't use Flash. It's a crying shame because whether developers like to admit it or not, nothing comes close to Flash for building fully interactive rich media websites. We couldn't have built *Die Hipster* in Canvas [HTML5's alternative to Flash] – we couldn't have even built the loader in Canvas. When Apple came out and said 'Flash is dead!' it was like a hammer blow to the Flash community. Marketing people will take statements like that to heart and go into panic mode. That's why we then had to suffer a year's worth of HTML work that looked like Flash circa 1998. It's like we've jumped back two decades in progress to make basic sites that will run on a very limited machine for a very limited audience. I think the majority are getting a bum deal out of it."

We suggest that, though Flash grandstanding is on the wane, websites in general have increasingly looked to games to enhance their appeal and establish communities. But Wefail contends this is largely implemented in the most cursory manner.

"The rare times we have clients talking to us,"





Wefail's website for Dark Night Of The Soul (dnots.com) resembles a pop-up book nightmare, biro scrawl unfolding from cardboard mannequins as the user toys with the space. It's fittingly creepy

Continue

Trico
That's it. We're done with living, breathing animals

Booting foes skyward
We're with stupid now that it's gone score attack

Axis Animation
Glasgow's CG outfit hits big with its *Dead Island* spot

Quit

THQ's localisation team
They've made a right boob with those Norks. Ahahaha

Virgin's Super Hub
If you've 'upgraded', too, you have our sympathy

PlayStation 3 updates
Perhaps this one will fix everything, hmm?

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"The Flash Is Bad movement was helped by the fact that a lot of Flash is, well, bad," says Stone (above left, with Hughes). And what of other internet entertainment? "It's unfair to single out Flash. What about YouTube? Ninety-nine per cent of YouTube is garbage"



says Stone, "they're always going on about badges. 'Will we have unlockable badges, guys?' So I suppose gameification is a fact. You have unlocked the drop-down menu badge!"

"Due to the client wanting their site to run on every platform, I'd say websites have become more static," says Hughes. "The days of exploring an immersive Flash site are few and far between because it may not run on your phone while you're sat in the pub. Which begs the question, why are people on the web when they're in the pub? Apart from to cheat on quiz night, I mean."

"We've jumped back two decades in progress to make basic sites that will run on a very limited machine for a very limited audience. I think the majority are getting a bum deal"

"We would be blind men to not notice that our way of life is dying," concedes Stone. "So we thought: 'Let's see if we could make a game'. [*Die Hipster*] is our first one."

Yet, though structured like a game, *Die Hipster* still benefits more from its aesthetic and humour than it does from precise platforming mechanics. The eponymous hero, being a puppet, is intentionally gangly to control, and the challenge of finding the trophies is throwaway alongside the draw of the viciously comic environment in which they are concealed. It's littered with details: a couple of felt figures can be spotted rutting in a window, others posing for saucy Polaroid snaps while a social media launch party booms away in a nearby building – each leant a suitably venomous commentary. Idle for a few seconds, and the hipster whips out his 'Douchepad' to tap out an enthusiastic tweet.

It's part game, part joke, part sustained subculture assassination. In other words, it's a rather tricky beast to categorise. Currently, Wefail has opted for an entirely voluntary payment strategy for *Die Hipster*, but could this sort of hybrid experience really make a place for itself on a dedicated gaming platform? Wefail is eager to expand in that direction, exploring rewarding and more explicitly gamey mechanics.

"If we can afford to, that is," says Stone. "Financially, life's tough without clients."

"After just a few days of the site being live, we can tell you now, the donations side of it isn't lucrative," says Hughes. "Unless by lucrative you mean 'able to buy a sandwich'. We need to make the donation button bigger. Much, much bigger."

Whether Wefail finds a life for itself on a console, or survives on the generosity of visitors, or even returns to marketing commissions as its source of income, the gaming experiences it makes are uniquely liminal – it would be a shame for such curios to bear the brunt of the feud between Apple and Flash's creator Adobe.



Apple's spat with Adobe isn't necessarily the end of Flash gaming, contends Stone; things change. "Years from now everyone could happily be enjoying *Die Hipster* [above] on their mobile phone – and by then people will hopefully realise that touch commands are lame"

Meanwhile, we ask, what about the fate of that poor little hipster? "He deserves everything he gets," says Hughes. "It's his love of stupid gadgetry that's now punishing the web with non-interactive, mediocre websites. Throw him to his doom."

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Ridge Racer Unbounded

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO**



'Drive, destroy, dominate' is the mantra for this moodier take on the series by *FlatOut* dev BugBear. In case you didn't get the point, the trailer includes high heels and rear-view brooding

Armored Core V

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO**



The mechs-on-a-mission return following the accomplished and accessible *For Answer*. This time, it's about online team play. Four players hit the battlefield with a fifth as a strategic eye in the sky

Elevator Action: Death Parade

FORMAT: **ARCADE** PUBLISHER: **TAITO**



The '80s arcade classic's second sequel and first genre change creeps west. Now a co-op gun game, the cabinet introduces a pair of elevator doors that open, close and obscure the action

Battlefield 3

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EA**



PC will be where it's at, with 64-player battles online. DICE has rewritten the engine and promises a more balanced singleplayer to accommodate all those guns and exploding… everything

Yakuza: Of The End

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**



After three sequels, a period prequel and a PSP spinoff, where to next? To zombies, tanks and guns, of course. Thirdperson zombie genocide shouldn't pose too much of a localisation challenge

The Darkness II

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**



Digital Extremes takes over from Starbreeze to shed some light on Jackie Estacado's soul. The studio's involvement with the *Unreal* series and *Dark Sector* should hold it in good stead

Inversion

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO**



Some rather bugged code dashed our hopes of the preview promised on this issue's newsstand packaging. We'll be taking a look at Namco's gravity-toying thirdperson shooter soon

Tekken Tag Tournament 2

FORMAT: **ARCADE** PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO**



Visually the offspring of *Tekkens 4* and *6* (the chunkier members of the family), while the promise of breakable walls sounds very *DOA* and the tag-team special moves look very *Marvel Vs Capcom*

Splinter Cell Trilogy HD

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**



Remake fever continues to grip publishers and tease wallets. The original *Splinter Cell*, *Pandora Tomorrow* and *Chaos Theory* make their way into the HD era with support for stereoscopic 3D



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Canary

www.nitrome.com/games/canary

As if the plight of canaries, forced to labour underground and mine for unscrupulous taskmasters, wasn't enough, an alien infestation has reared its pink, squirming head and forced the miniature heroes into action. Using your laser tool to burn a path through the horizontally scrolling maze, *Canary* has an old-fashioned, beat-the-screen structure with a simple but consistently surprising gameplay mechanic.

At first your laser is relegated to simple cuts through rock, creating paths to the finish line and occasionally moving objects that stand in your way. You control your canary warrior with the mouse, and click to initiate your firepower. The challenge soon ramps up, and before long you're lasering the pink blobs while avoiding traps and dodging projectiles. Making an incision in the rock above an unsuspecting enemy takes a steady hand and careful planning.

Canary's challenge continues to surprise as the short levels progress, with variables like gravity switches and mirrors stretching, but never exhausting, the core concept.

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Amount of Credit	£12,295.00
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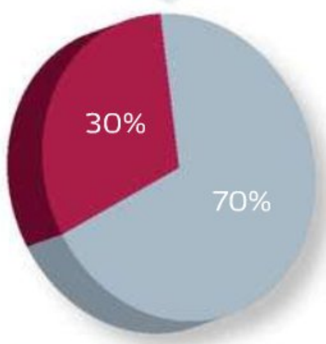
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Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

Expected $100m consumer spending on Moshi Monsters



■ Moshi Monsters merchandise
■ Moshi Monsters virtual world
Source: IHS Screen Digest

Physical ambitions for virtual worlds

Piers Harding-Rolls examines Mind Candy's expansive licensing strategy

Been to a large supermarket recently? One big enough to house an aisle of toys? If you have, you may well have been exposed to an onslaught of *Moshi Monsters* merchandise, from Top Trumps to plush toys. In the past it's been a commonplace strategy for toy manufacturers to extend the toy experience to make it more relevant to the internet-savvy kids of today, by building virtual worlds connected to physical toys like Barbie, Webkinz, Bratz, Beanie Babies and Build-A-Bear. Likewise, gaming merchandise, often centred on action figures for console game franchises or trading card games for MMOGs, has been with us for many years, but Mind Candy's scale and breadth of its licensing strategy for a single online platform company is unique for a UK company.

Not only is the scale of execution something to behold, but the flow of intellectual property (IP) licensing from virtual world to physical world – and in particular licences offered to toy manufacturers – is an escalating trend for owners of online and mobile game IP. Recent market developments confirm this. Mattel, the world's largest toy company, has been aggressive in its acquisition of licences centred on mainstream games IP outside of traditional console game franchises, forging agreements with *Angry Birds* creator Rovio for a boardgame version of the hit mobile app, and with Stardoll to make dolls from virtual characters. This reflects the increasing importance of kids' engagement with, and emotional attachment to, virtual characters, and also the growing value of gaming IP served online or through mobile devices. As a result, I expect other toy manufacturers to follow Mattel's lead more actively in 2011.

Let's get back to Mind Candy and *Moshi Monsters*. The rollout of licensed merchandise has been speedy and wide ranging. We've seen some comparable merchandise based on *Club Penguin* –





Kids' MMOG *Moshi Monsters* has acquired an enormous fanbase since its 2008 launch

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owned and operated by Disney – but considering the parent company's modus operandi there is little surprise there. Perhaps more comparably to Mind Candy, the French animation and MMOG company Ankama should be considered a pioneer in licensing and merchandising. Its *Dofus* and *Wakfu* properties have spawned a large range of collectable figures, plush toys, clothes, music and books.

Mind Candy's licensing strategy mirrors Ankama's in many ways. The company operates an online-only gaming property, and while popular, the extent of merchandising is admirable. Licensing extends to books, magazines, plush toys, collectable figures, Top Trumps cards, trading cards, Silly Bandz, key rings, calendars and posters. The company also recently announced the upcoming availability of Moshi TV, an online video platform for *Moshi Monsters* users.

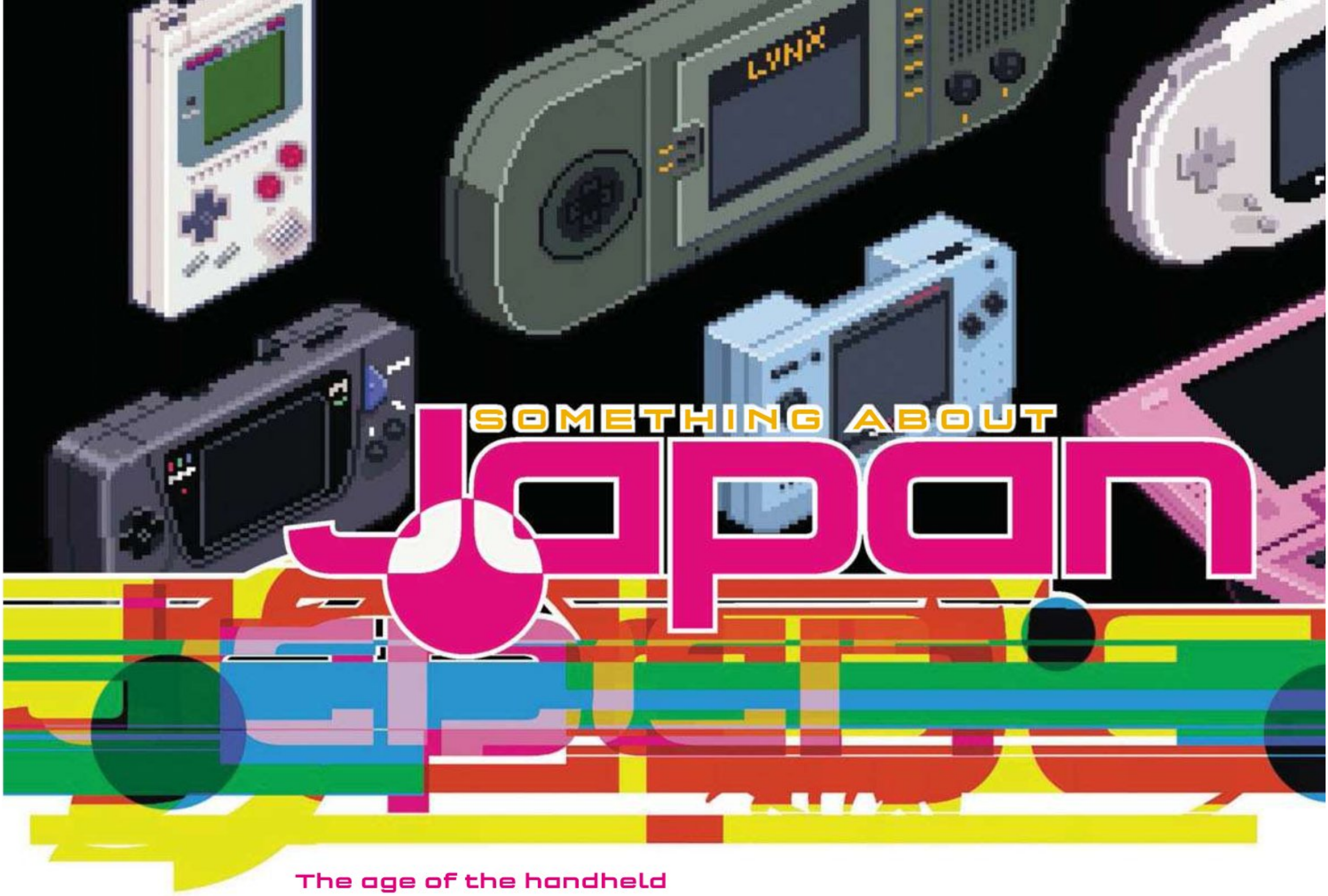
Mattel, the world's largest toy company, has been aggressive in its acquisition of licences, forging agreements with Angry Birds creator Rovio for a boardgame version

The benefits of this comprehensive strategy are plain to see. Not only does licensing provide a substantial alternative revenue stream (important for subscription-based games that have little chance to grow individual user spend), it engages *Moshi* users away from the computer screen. This engagement is vital to maintain interest in the IP beyond the normal customer lifecycle within the highly competitive space of kids' virtual worlds.

Merchandise also plays an important role in acquiring new customers for the online platform. *Moshi Monsters* is targeted at kids aged six to 12. Many kids at around six have yet to be heavily exposed to the internet or kids' virtual worlds, but are expressing an interest in online activities. Mind Candy is engaging these users (and their parents) in the toy aisles of the supermarkets before they are engaged by the competition online. Having an 'offline' presence and brand also improves trust in your online property, and as parents are more exposed to the *Moshi Monsters* name in the real world, they are more likely to pay for subscriptions to the virtual world.

Mind Candy's licensing empire encompasses trading cards, collectable figures, bag charms and keyrings, mugs, bags, collectable bands, books, magazines, toys, clothes, accessories, badges and more

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SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

The age of the handheld

Christophe Kagotani says the new era of portable gaming isn't coming – it's already here



So, this is the year of the portable? In Japan, it has been the age of the portable for quite some time. As in the past, Nintendo's outright domination of portable gaming has been challenged. Sony's NGP is coming. It has new ideas, ambitions, and the design has matured.

But, as in the past, will the challenge to Nintendo's rule fail? The Neo Geo Pocket was not able to eat into Nintendo's share. Sitting on the bench, sore from battle, previous contenders looked at SNK's example and no doubt saw the same old story played out.

You see, coming to the market with more advanced technology than the market leader is not enough. Every previous challenger has done that and failed. The technology has to serve a greater purpose, a vision, a new – or renewed – gaming experience. You can't just put new tech on the table and wait for people to figure out how to use it. We're witnessing the awkwardness of that approach now.

It has been more than 20 years since the first Game Boy gave birth to a portable market that hasn't stopped growing since. But before going portable, Nintendo had to see if there really was a hunger for such a gaming experience, and then decide how it should be designed. The hardware supported the overall vision, providing not only the platform but also an affordable price-tag and autonomy for developers.

The competition couldn't resist – or be blamed for – an attempt on such a huge, fresh market. Back in the day, however, it wasn't really so difficult. A good, simple balance of technological advancement and software would have been enough to win over the people, but it never happened – and still hasn't. Even the PSP struggles, owing its survival to the Japanese market, and one monster hunting game in particular. What's to say that this time will be any different? The devil, as they say, is in the details.

A new element has been added to the increasingly complex equation of portable entertainment: the social network. The 3DS and NGP may look like more of the same but the real revolution is invisible, beating deep at their core

We are at a critical point in history for portable gaming, and once again Nintendo has to ask itself if there is a hunger for a new handheld. Times change, inevitably, and while the Game Boy managed over successive generations to mature Nintendo's brand of portable gaming, the DS had to address the new challenges that surfaced with this maturity. It successfully kept people excited about handheld gaming and even reached new audiences. But it did not create the new generation of game makers that it had the potential to.

The fact is, with the DS, the videogame ecosystem was still very much anchored in the past. It was the same, initially, for the PSP, until someone managed to find the key to success on the platform. I'll give you a clue – it involved monsters, hunting and a strong social aspect (something the DS glaringly lacks).

A new element, then, has been added to the increasingly complex equation of portable entertainment, one that can't be addressed with a new set of controls or extra technological power: the social network. The 3DS and NGP may look like more of the same, especially when you consider their looks, but the real revolution is invisible, beating deep at their very core.

Nintendo is using 3D to draw users in

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before they realise what the 3DS really stands for: social connectivity. Sony is again going for raw power but also making a connection with the mobile world. Is it the future, or too little too late? This new frontier for handheld gaming reveals that the new generation of game creator has been with us for some time – they just weren't working on the DS or the PSP.

Mobile phones such as the iPhone have been the breeding ground for a new generation of developers. People are experimenting with a simple set of tools, like in the good old days of the Famicom. The problem facing 3DS and NGP is that they aren't just up against a new device – they're up against a new, revolutionary model of development and a new world of creators.

It may not have been premeditated, and some of it is just good luck, but the iPhone has, mostly, got everything right for game creators. As a developer friend of mine told me: the phone is your debug system. It couldn't be simpler or more affordable. The tools are very cheap, if not free. The distribution channel is centralised, open to the world. Small teams can work in its ecosystem and profit from it.

Of course, it's not a perfect model. Since the iPhone is not a dedicated gaming device it has to meet other requirements that limit its market penetration in the gaming world. Still, it has such an influence that videogame companies can't ignore it and keep doing business as usual.

Is there a need, then, for a dedicated videogame handheld today? Portability is needed, certainly. Until Apple feels capable and willing to go after the videogame industry 100 per cent (lack of interest or the right people may currently be to blame), this could be the only window for 3DS and NGP to figure out how to connect with the modern crowd.

I start to hear familiar voices around me. "Portable projects require lots of resources nowadays." "Developers look for the platform that shows the best chance of a solid launch." The confrontation of 3DS and NGP is, indeed, nostalgic: Nintendo has always been good at getting the right lineup to support a platform's launch, and with NGP many are waiting for a *Monster Hunter Portable* to be released, waiting for the key to success to once again be revealed. In the meantime, though, most of them are recruiting for mobile projects. The clock is ticking for traditional handheld gaming.





Mediacreate Japanese sales, February 7-13

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***Tales Of The World: Radiant Mythology 3*** (BNG, PSP): 222,000 (NE)
2. ***Sengoku Musou 3 Z*** (Koei, PS3): 209,000 (NE)
3. ***Monster Hunter Portable 3rd*** (Capcom, PSP): 93,000 (4,250,000)
4. ***Gyakuten Kenji 2*** (Capcom, DS): 31,000 (163,000)
5. ***Little Big Planet 2*** (SCE, PS3): 25,000 (NE)
6. ***Sengoku Musou 3 Moshoden*** (Koei, Wii): 23,000 (NE)
7. ***Red Dead Redemption Undead Nightmare*** (Take 2, PS3): 22,000 (NE)
8. ***Donkey Kong Returns*** (Nintendo, Wii): 16,000 (860,000)
9. ***Kenka Bancho 5*** (Spike, PSP): 14,000 (101,000)
10. ***Shirokishi Monogatari Episode Portable: Dogma Wars*** (SCE, PSP): 11,000 (52,000)

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- **Mii Maker**
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- **SpotPass**
  Your Nintendo 3DS will download new game data via Wi-Fi, even as you sleep!
- **StreetPass**
  Exchange data with other Nintendo 3DS units, even in sleep mode. See what friends are playing or take on the world!

www.nintendo3DS.co.uk

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Nintendo 3DS is a games console, but it's also a gamer's console. The features packed into Nintendo's new handheld will make gaming more immersive than ever before – and that's not just because of the unique 3D visuals.

Of course, the three-dimensional graphics are what's most immediately striking. They provide unrivalled depth of field, making you feel like you are really 'in' the game. You can adjust the 3D effect using the new 3D Depth Slider to customise your experience, and the 3D can even be turned off entirely.

3D in motion

New control methods also draw you in. The new Circle Pad controller allows 360-degree analogue input which is responsive and precise. Motion sensors and gyro sensors are put to innovative use. For example you control *Steel Diver*'s periscope by moving the Nintendo 3DS around as if it's a real spy-snorkel. An impressive 13 full games will be available to buy when the console launches on 25 March, and Nintendo's 3DS Tour is giving gamers around the UK a chance to try out some of these titles before the console arrives (see 'Try it for yourself').

You can also buy vintage Game Boy and Game Boy Color titles from the online Nintendo eShop, and transfer DSiWare from your Nintendo DSi to your Nintendo 3DS. Nintendo 3DS also introduces a new age of communication in handheld gaming, as the StreetPass feature lets Nintendo 3DS units exchange data even while in sleep mode. Which means that while you're on the bus, in a supermarket or simply walking down the street, your games – from *Super Street Fighter IV 3D Edition* to *Nintendogs + Cats* – will swap information with other Nintendo 3DS users' games. Now you can take on the world without even realising!

> **"StreetPass lets Nintendo 3DS units exchange data even in sleep mode"**

SpotPass, meanwhile, detects Wi-Fi access points to download game data, software, videos and more – again, even if the Nintendo 3DS is in sleep mode. Your Nintendo 3DS is 'always on', ready to find a new challenger, post your rankings online or see what your friends are playing. With so many new features at your fingertips, this really is a new dimension of gaming.

Try it for yourself!



Nintendo's nationwide sampling tour runs from 24 February up to launch, offering everyone the chance to experience the Nintendo 3DS at events all over the UK. With games such as *Super Street Fighter™ IV 3D, Resident Evil™ The Mercenaries 3D* and *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D*, there's a whole range of software to play. The events will also display and explain StreetPass, SpotPass, Augmented Reality games and the 3D camera.

Consultants will be on hand to help you pre-order your Nintendo 3DS, and to blog and update Twitter, Facebook and gaming forums while there – making all of your friends jealous!

The Nintendo 3DS Tour starts in Edinburgh and Glasgow on 24 February, moving through the UK to Southampton and Plymouth. To find out when it's coming to a city near you, join us online at **www.nintendo3DS.co.uk**.

> **"The graphics are the best I've seen on a handheld. It makes the whole experience better"**
> Hamish Jupp

> "We've all wondered: this boss fight, imagine if I was actually there. 3DS bridges that gap"
> Wayne Naylor

> **"You have to see the 3DS to believe it. There is no other videogaming experience like it"**
> Samuel Roberts

Confirmed games in development include Pilotwings Resort™, Nintendogs™ + Cats, Steel Diver™, The Legend Of Zelda™: Ocarina Of Time™ 3D, Star Fox 64™ 3D, Kid Icarus™: Uprising, Mario Kart™, Paper Mario™, Super Street Fighter® IV 3D Edition, Resident Evil®: The Mercenaries 3D Edition, PES 2011 3D – Pro Evolution Soccer, Ridge Racer™ 3D, Super Monkey Ball™ 3D

Not all the Nintendo 3DS features and software mentioned here will be available at launch

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The games in development...



Super Street Fighter IV 3D Edition

The world's most famous fighter franchise is back on Nintendo in full 3D. Watch the feet and fists flying in amazing detail.



Kid Icarus: Uprising

Hit the skies to fight legendary monsters in this 3D update of the 8bit series. Greek myths have never been more entertaining.



The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time 3D

One of the greatest games ever made, *Ocarina Of Time* gets an incredible 3D makeover for the 21st century.



Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D

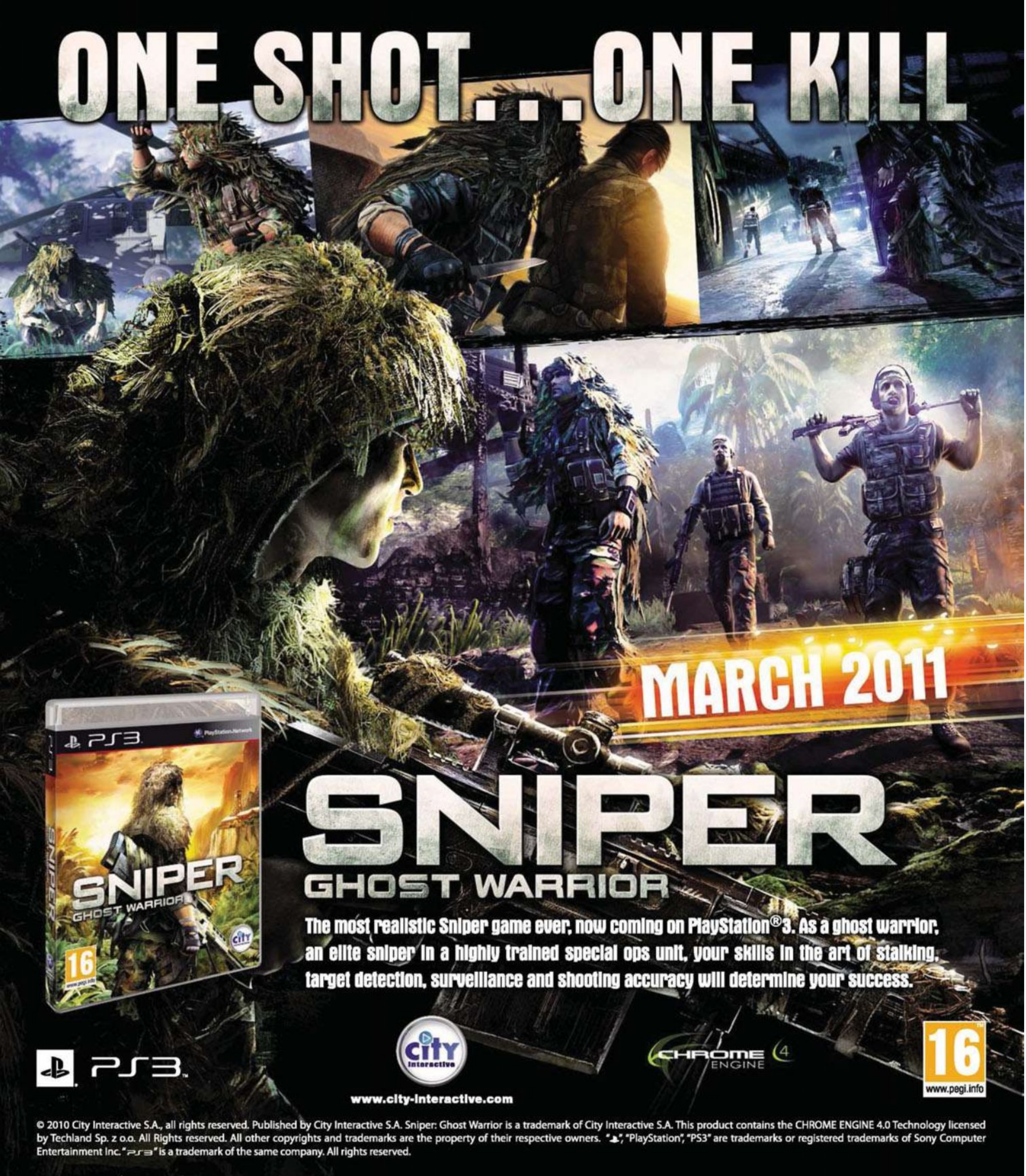
Prepare to be scared like never before as 3DS brings the horror to life. There's no hiding place when the undead are in 3D...



Pilotwings Resort

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Hype

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Jagged Alliance: Back In Action



A new subtitle affirms this as a modern remake of *JA2*, not a mere re-release. But will the classic's turn-based charms get smothered or streamlined in the refresh?
PC, KALYPSO MEDIA

Operation Flashpoint: Red River



After the sublime stupidity of *Bulletstorm*, we're wondering if we'll need a trip to boot camp before we're in shape to face this cruel, cordite-smogged sim.
360, PC, PS3, CODEMASTERS

Gears Of War 3



Epic's franchise is forever chasing greater levels of scale and variety. But how will it trump snowy peaks, apocalyptic skylines, subterranean cathedrals and a Brumak rodeo?
360, EPIC GAMES

How hard can it be?

Just what role does difficulty play in the mass market?



Demon's Souls invited punishment gluttons to strive for its rewards. In gaming's new wave of casual titles, discipline and hard work have been overshadowed by accessibility and immediacy

"In order to give players a bigger sense of achievement and satisfaction I simply have to make this game more difficult, compared to *Demon's Souls*," says *Dark Souls*' main man **Hidetaka Miyazaki**. Is it really that simple? As you'll read in our feature on p50, he qualifies this with an emphasis on fairness, but the statement still rings a little hollow. Not all gruelling challenges are worth the risk – the pleasure of mastery may be made more potent by deferral, but only if the basic task is itself alluring.

Lucky, then, that *Demon's Souls* matches its towering challenge with a uniquely captivating sense of exploration. Knowledge is the true power, and real reward, of this series. But these titles are the exceptions of recent years, not the rule. The reaction to – and emphasis on – *Demon's Souls*' difficulty, as if generous save points have been with us forever and as if bullet hell never happened, also reveals how soft we've become.

The recent rush to flatten challenge may have coincided with a need to court a new, larger audience, but perhaps it was also a reaction to the fact that some of the challenges we were facing were boringly ubiquitous and nakedly cheap. Perhaps we've fought all the boss battles we really need to at this point – making them hard merely puts a greater distance between us and our continued enjoyment of the game.

It is not the difficulty that is *Demon's Souls*' draw, however, but the management of it – few other games do it so well. Historically, difficulty has had a whiff of contrivance about it – not only did it tend to orbit around your singular skill at pressing buttons, but your success was entirely subject to the machinations of a perverse designer-god. Any shortfall you experienced between desire and action was artificial, a trick of the difficulty slider.

In the modern age of casual gaming, titles like *Demon's Souls* are harnessing the high-risk/slight-reward design ethos of the past to carve a new, standout brand of contemporary play. Only a handful of designers have managed to perform the trick of enticing players to feed the beast that bites them. For the rest of the industry, figuring out how to be so cruel and kind at the same time is the real challenge.













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FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **EIDOS MONTREAL**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **APRIL**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E217**

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

We pit our augmented brain box against the thinking man's shooter

You are Adam Jensen, head of security at Sarif Industries, a biotech company on the verge of a massive breakthrough, one which could see the benefits of cybernetic augmentation fall within the reach of ordinary citizens. Not everyone wants to see this happen – a powerful cabal works against Sarif from the shadows, hoping to retain its elitism, while anti-augmentation radicals clamour for a return to human purity. But is all as it seems? Is the charismatic company founder playing you in some larger unseen game? Can you trust your mission operator? Does Jensen have any murky secrets of his own?

Paranoia transmutes into action very quickly, in this much-awaited prequel to the much-lauded RPG-shooter hybrid, and the first few hours of the game consist of two relatively linear missions – one a panicked exfiltration, thrusting you into gunfire and chaos with little choice, and the second a more nuanced infiltration, breaking the player into the sprawl of options the series famously represents. Devs emphasise that the game gets considerably less linear as it goes on, and you will once again explore large city-hubs of the kind so fondly remembered in the first game. But initially, the missions hurry you into relatively simple choices: discretion or aggression; lethal or non.

We opt for the sneaky peacenik route, selecting a number of augments to aid us along the way: a stealth enhancement to our radar that displays enemies' cones of vision; an optical augment that allows us to briefly see through walls, and a cloaking device that, we discover, works for a near-negligible amount of time. The last two gobble energy when used – as do Jensen's context-sensitive takedowns – forcing an unusual balancing act. End up with a flat battery in combat, and you won't be able to punch. Meanwhile, chomping the chocolate bars you find lying around will boost your power levels back up.

> Deus Ex is not a game designed for the twitch-targeting run-and-gun crowd. Barrel straight into a room of thugs and Jensen will end up as an augmented hamburger

Our chosen non-lethal approach means hunting for routes around enemies, and the thirdperson cover system is extremely useful for this purpose, with the camera pulling out to reveal Jensen hunkered down behind a laboratory table as a witless goon strolls past on the other side. The levels also provide handy ducts, ladders and crawlspaces – although they are often well hidden. Finding them isn't always easy when you're trying to keep your head down, and though the difficulty of remaining concealed creates a powerful tension, stealth restricts your exploration. A hostage rescue side-mission passes us by on our first playthrough, simply because we're so intent on scuttling through a room unseen that we don't spot the appropriate door on the other side, let alone the vent that will lead us there.

Such a failure has consequences – Jensen's pilot chides us for our callous focus on the company's objectives. Have we just lost a potential ally? Clearly the world is reactive to the player's approach, even at this early stage of the game, and the second mission ends with a decision that can only have profound impact on Jensen's allegiances some way down the line. Even outlandish behaviour is acceptable – you can turn upon your allies in SWAT, should you so wish, and the game simply adapts (although we didn't survive long enough to test the longer term implications). Later, at a climactic moment, we decide we've had enough of negotiations, and launch ourselves across a room, hoping to land a decisive melee attack before a terrorist can shoot the office worker he has at gunpoint. We succeed, sort of: the contextual prompt appears, and we duly hit it, only to watch in amazement (and some delight) as Jensen lamps the hostage in front of an extremely confused terrorist – who then shoots us dead. That such a thing is even possible, although absurd, underscores just the sort of flexibility and dynamism that should comprise a *Deus Ex* game.

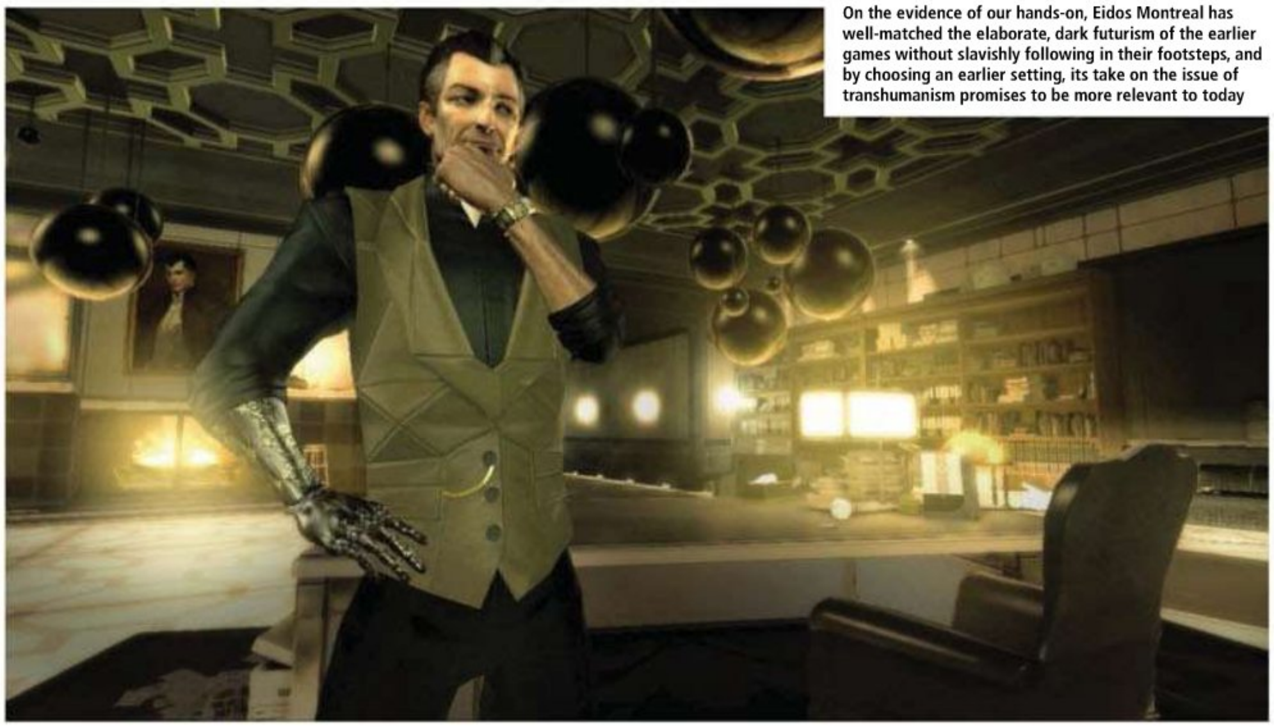
In one other way it is also true to its roots: the shooting comes across a bit stiff. Certainly, *Deus Ex* is not a game designed for the twitch-targeting run-and-gun crowd. Barrel straight into a room of thugs and



Reaction movie

Enemies feel reactive and organic – although their initial patrols may be predictable, make a noise and they investigate with some thoroughness. When they're alert to your presence, they call for help, fan out and flank. This produces thrills as often as it does death, of course: a moment of clumsiness in a cafeteria attracts nearby goons to investigate, and with alarm, our X-ray vision picks them out just as they're about to enter. Somehow we keep our head and slip behind the door as it opens, letting the thugs wander into the room, then sliding silently out and on with the mission. That's what being a transhuman supersleuth is all about.





On the evidence of our hands-on, Eidos Montreal has well-matched the elaborate, dark futurism of the earlier games without slavishly following in their footsteps, and by choosing an earlier setting, its take on the issue of transhumanism promises to be more relevant to today

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Jensen will end up as an expensively augmented hamburger in very little time. Discretion and planning is always key, and even those with a selection of more confrontational upgrades will find themselves in trouble if they ignore cover or allow enemies to flank them. Perhaps it is to encourage caution, then, that the aiming is made unusually tricky on console: the analogue sticks exhibiting a slothful deadzone in the centre with extremely abrupt acceleration thereafter. To begin with, we actually found it embarrassingly hard to hit *anyone* – and, without being excessively big-headed, we've put enough time into *Halo* to reliably send bullets where we want them to go. Our erratic spraying in *Human Revolution* is something of an alarming comedown, and we hope the controls are subject to late-development tweaking.

It's clear, however, that *Human Revolution* is a game rich in possibility, embedded in a world which is every bit as alluring, complex and ambiguous as that of the original. There may be concessions to the shooters of today – thirdperson cover and recharging health being the foremost among these – but it looks to recapture much of the first game's uncompromising spirit: the dice of dynamism are rolled, and you have to suck up the consequences (see 'Reaction movie'). Without knowing quite how the game opens up, witnessing the greater consequences of our actions or exploring the game's social aspects, it's hard to call whether this will truly rival its most fêted predecessor – but on the merits of its earliest, most simple missions, the potential is there. And even if it never scales those heights, with the growing dominance of barely-interactive spectaculars like *Call Of Duty*, any reason to pause for thought is welcome.



The stealth aspect of the game is hard to convey in screenshots, since you spend a fair amount of time ducking beneath walls and other cover spots. The sort of brash exchange of bullets above would be suicidal unless bolstered by a host of damage-reducing augments



The context-sensitive melee attacks are a vital part of the game, and ensuring you have enough energy to take opponents on is vital. Lethal manoeuvres like the above are noisier in execution, but Jensen doesn't spare the pain with his non-lethal take-downs either – the animations often involving horrific bone-snapping and suffocation

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FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **PLATINUM GAMES**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q3 2011**

Anarchy Reigns

Platinum Games wants to teach the world to reach out and punch itself

The temptation is to call *Anarchy Reigns* a fighting game. But the more you watch its combatants pile on to each other, hit from behind and raze tower blocks with a single pound, the more they make Ryu and Ken look like gentlemen. Fighting games are never this dirty.

Anarchy Reigns doesn't play by the Queensbury Rules: it's a brawler. A 3D arena battle featuring multiple close-quarters combatants, its bouts play out in dynamic levels populated by lesser thugs. It's a boot-first kind of showdown, and its key feature is online multiplayer, a space that Platinum Games believes is over-saturated with shooters. Though there are clear debts to 3D beat 'em ups (many also made by Platinum Games), this is not just a 3D beat 'em up in multiplayer – this is on a new scale.

Its world is an apocalyptic one: ripped-up supercities reminiscent of Neo-Tokyo, visited frequently by disasters both man-made and natural. The streets lead into mazes of back alleys and the few remaining skyscrapers go up and up, buttressed by climbable scaffolding. *Anarchy Reigns* is big in every direction: some respawn points put you atop the level's highest building, just so you can land in the fray with a gravity-assisted bump.

Everything is over-the-top: the characters are a mix of feathered hats, suspenders, whips and chainsaws, whose interactions range from mild spanking to limb-ripping







Each character has a signature weapon, as well as a special attack and 'Rage Mode', which seems to increase power and endurance. Oh, and they can all throw cars

The camera's centred behind your character, with a lock-on system to home in on specific opponents. Locking on focuses your attacks and allows for the more powerful moves – but it's also necessary for following anything in the massive rucks that develop. In Battle Royal, an eightplayer free-for-all, one-on-one fighting is the exception rather than the rule, with isolated battles an irresistible target for third parties with the aforementioned boot-first approach. Add to this the constant stream of minor enemies (which become progressively tougher), the collapsing scenery, the odd act of God, and it's hard to process, let alone play.

Everything is over-the-top: the violence is 18-rated, and deserves to be, but is also bloodthirstily comic. The characters are a mix of feathered hats, suspenders, whips and chainsaws, whose interactions range from mild spanking to limb-ripping. *AR* channels *God Hand* heavily, even more so than Platinum's previous work, and Clover's cult brawler seems to be very much on its makers' minds. Here it's in the movesets, the straddling and slaps that are uber-violent with a coquettish wink. Other developers would shy away from the kind of crass humour *AR* delights in, which is probably why Platinum just about gets away with re-casting *MadWorld*'s star turn, The Black Baron, as The Blacker Baron. His tagline, as delivered by deadpan producer **Atsushi Inaba**: "Blacker, bigger, better". Capcom hints at *God Hand* sequels, but *AR* makes such talk moot – and, if nothing else, bodes well for fans of sadomasochism and Engrish.

The controls suggest a fighting system closer to *MadWorld* than *Bayonetta*: light and heavy attack buttons are joined by jump, grab, evade and block. The fights we've seen have been full of combos and charge

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Jack, The Blacker Baron and Mathilda are familiar from *MadWorld*. That game's art direction remains stunning today, but its combat was too repetitive for classic status

attacks, as well as what look like combo-breakers tied in to the split-second slowdown that seems to accompany certain blows. There's a sense of connection missing at the moment: animations don't quite gel, characters don't react in proportion to the blows they're receiving, and certain exchanges look clumsy. This is early code, of course, but feedback and precision are acid tests for would-be online hits, and *AR*'s first showing isn't stellar.

The 'Action Trigger Events', on the other hand, bring the house down. These are giant disasters that befall each stage and toss combatants about like ragdolls: we've seen black holes, massive saw blades, a tsunami wave, bridges collapsing, and bombing runs (in which "YOU are the collateral damage!"). Platinum Games president Inaba says they "drastically affect the situation in a split second, so a pinch can become an opportunity". Poetic as that is, in our demo the tactical side of ATEs was elusive – the pyrotechnics seem to send everyone and everything flying, and don't spare the kitchen sink.

When *AR*'s Battles Royal really kick off, in other words, it's crazy. There are fighters on fire, bombs detonating, people falling from the sky, berserk mutants that look like something out of The Thing roaming around, and lines of cyborgs chasing each other over the tops of buildings like this is *Crackdown 2*.



The NPC enemies that wander around can be toyed with, and their limbs can also be removed, though whether this is just a stage in their health bar or a tactical option is unclear

By the time the helicopters and giant squid turn up, you're idly wondering when Godzilla's going to put in an appearance.

Anarchy Reigns is Platinum Games seeing a niche and going for it. A multiplayer-centric 3D brawler on consoles is a step into the unknown, in an environment that has not been kind to dedicated multiplayer experiences – who recalls *Shadowrun* on Xbox 360 with fondness? There's every chance this could be a noble failure, and we're still not totally convinced about the basic combat. But if guts, ambition and Platinum's track record are anything to go by, this could yet be a knockout.



Turning up the heat

The Battle Royal mode has a few neat sidelines to the all-in brawling. The first sees occasional item spawns pulling together all of the combatants for massive power-up punch-ups. Then there are the 'Duels to the Death', one-on-one cage matches between two players with a prize for the winner, while around them the fight goes on unhindered. We've also seen 'Survival Mode', a simpler affair: you and a number of buddies (in our case three players total) face off against waves of the lesser monsters which quickly give way to gigantic mutants and flamethrower-toting midgets. After a few rounds of easy pummelling to get the blood pumping, the intensity ramps up, and shows a large and varied cast of NPC antagonists.





There's clearly a persistent levelling system overlaid on the online matches, with an 'abilities' option on a menu screen suggesting tweakable movesets

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FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA**
DEVELOPER: **SPLASH DAMAGE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MAY**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E204, E208, E217**

Brink

Is it on the edge of greatness, or about to take one step too far?



Antisocial networking

***Brink* does feature a singleplayer campaign, but while we've yet to play it, we very much doubt it'll be anything other than training wheels for the online mode, which also features story and cutscenes… at least for the handful of people not mashing buttons to get to the part where they can throw grenades and make heads explode.**

Newcomers might want to cut their teeth on the singleplayer mode anyway, for one good reason: since it uses the standard game mechanics, AI players can be swapped in and out at will for real people. What starts as a singleplayer game could end up as versus, co-op, or a mix of both, but any of them will be less intimidating than trying to learn the ropes on a random server.

Brink is more than just another shooter. It's Splash Damage's chance to prove that it has what it takes to play with the big boys, not simply handle the multiplayer side of their franchises. It's a hungry game, an ambitious one, and one with more than a little of *Team Fortress 2*'s revolutionary spirit. *Brink* doesn't try to replicate that game's aesthetics or style, but it does seem to have borrowed a core part of its design: to find ways to not simply enable or enforce team play, but to outright encourage it and make it feel natural.

The most obvious example of this is that, in *Brink*, everyone has a support role. Soldiers can throw extra ammo to people, medics can revive the dead, engineers get a powerful damage buff. You're limited to how many buffs you can hand out at once, but only by how much energy you have, and that recharges quickly. You'll never run out, nor have to head back for extra supplies, nor feel guilty about wasting someone else's buff. Not only does this make it easier to be altruistic towards your teammates, it offers a clear advantage to travelling in groups instead of playing the lone wolf. If you're a soldier, for instance, you can keep replenishing your own ammo, but you'll be a lot more dangerous with an engineer alongside.

Selfish players are largely dealt with by making individual kills almost irrelevant. Maps are geared around specific objectives: bombing this, repairing that, or escorting an NPC to safety. Ideally, you'll do these because you want to – but if you don't, helping your team is still the best way to earn XP, level up and unlock the best toys. And if it comes to it, the game will casually remind you that you might want to throw your nearby friend a pack of ammo. No pressure, and you'll both be running towards the next battle anyway.



> Don't be fooled into thinking Brink is a laid-back shooter. With the number of minigunners and other squad members running around, there isn't time for complicated tactics

Don't be fooled into thinking that all this caring and sharing makes *Brink* a laid-back shooter. It's anything but. The action is brutally fast, verging on merciless, telling novice players only to 'move more than you shoot'. With the number of grenades, explosives, minigunners and other squad members running around, there isn't time for complicated tactics. You have regenerating health and plenty of cover – they help but they won't save you. Death has very little sting, but remains a constant presence.

The result of this is that teams rarely go in and execute a fixed plan with military precision, but rather keep crashing against the enemy in waves – gaining ground, pushing back, and simply assuming everyone is playing their part. To keep things civil, *Brink* actually switches VOIP off by default, preferring players to handle orders via preset commands instead of angry rants about the medics' mothers.

Character customisation options, meanwhile, are surprisingly complex, especially when you start unlocking class-specific character perks that bend the normal game rules. One, for instance, gives you a warning flash if an unseen enemy has you in his sights. Another lets you switch to thirdperson mode when working on objectives like planting bombs, giving you greater awareness of your surroundings.

Even more importantly, you're not locked in to your choices, not even for the duration of a single game. Simply run up to a command post in-game and you can pull anything you've collected out of storage,

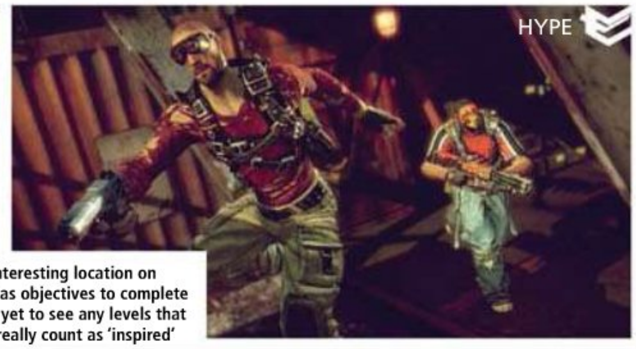


There aren't any one-shot kill sniper rifles for you to hang back in your base and abuse, although you can still fight effectively at a distance using iron sights and unlockable weapon upgrades

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The Ark seems like an interesting location on paper, and every class has objectives to complete on the maps, but we've yet to see any levels that move past 'pretty' and really count as 'inspired'









Neither the Security nor Resistance side seems to have much time for uniforms. You can look however you like, as long as it's a grungy chap with a big gun. Clothes are purely aesthetic choices

or switch class, as often as you like. So can the other team. This will hopefully keep individual games varied even if the number of missions remains as limited as it currently appears. While perfectly fine the first few times, the demo level we played through in this latest build wasn't one we'd still want to be replaying in six months' time.

As with all multiplayer games, though, none of this will matter if *Brink* doesn't click with the players. Its big challenge will be convincing the world that the speed and dexterity required to feel competitive don't simply make it only for the hardcore, even as it tries to persuade that same core gamer market that it can have fun without chasing personal glory all the time.

The best trick that *Team Fortress 2* pulled was managing to make it almost as much fun to lose as it was to win. If *Brink* can pull off something similar, it stands a good chance of getting the debut it deserves, and giving players everywhere a good reason to consider officially putting the 'I' back in 'team'.



The natural instinct is to buddy up, but if you stick in a group, even the medic can dish out plenty of pain between revive syringes, while engineers can put down defensive turrets almost anywhere

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FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI (UK), ATARI (US)**
DEVELOPER: **CD PROJEKT RED**
ORIGIN: **POLAND**
RELEASE: **MAY 17**

The Witcher 2: Assassins Of Kings

Geralt returns for more sex and slaying. The likelihood of a few dead kings is high too







In a development landscape in which one-game studios are increasingly rare, here's CD Projekt RED focusing every iota of its attention on one game – one game that, three-and-a-half years on, hopes to revolutionise the original *Witcher*'s combat and slightly lower its accessibility threshold without compromising on its storytelling or adult thematic focus. It's not an easy ask. It's tempting to see *The Witcher*'s extreme popularity with a vocal subset of the European PC gaming community as a direct result of its refusal to pander to the player. You had to work hard to get the most out of that sultry fantasy, and fans were justifiably proud of breaking through the barrier.

But *The Witcher 2* isn't pandering – it's changing the experimental melee fighting system to something more recognisable to action adventurers, but that sharp, Gothic, slightly bawdy tone certainly remains. The quest selected for our hands-on suggests the same preoccupation with sex as the first game: a succubus has been luring young elven and human men out of town and, it would seem, gruesomely murdering them after some unearthly carnal pleasures.

As Geralt – who is as surly and gruff as ever – we are deposited into a well-fortified village. The place carries the whiff of poverty – the ambient soundtrack is dotted with babies' baleful crying and barking dogs, and there's a coat of grime about the masonry – but it's a lively place, full of merchants and wandering, chatting dwarves. It looks expansive, too, but large sections of it are blocked off for the purposes of our demo.

An elven gentleman outside an inn dispenses the quest – but initially the inn itself proves more interesting. Within, a host of opponents await for poker, dice and arm wrestling challenges, and QTEs surface in a boxing minigame.

It's changing the experimental melee fighting system to something more recognisable to action adventurers, but that sharp, Gothic, slightly bawdy tone certainly remains

Dandelion, the philandering minstrel who was the closest thing Geralt had to a friend in the first game, is composing an anthem for the town in front of a glum-looking crowd of dwarves. A spirited exchange shows that the dialogue still sparkles, helped along by considerably better conversational animation. Further exchanges throughout the demo indicate that *The Witcher 2*'s script, written simultaneously in Polish and English, is likely to be its greatest strength.

Venturing out of town in search of the tomb housing the succubus's victims, the game shows off some splendid outdoor environments. Admittedly, this build is running on a PC practically the size of a pool table, but the waterfall in the forest outside of town makes you want to stop and stare. It's out here that we get our first taste of the revamped combat system – albeit with a



The quest log is unusual, written in florid style by badly behaved bard Dandelion. English might not be the game's first language, but its narrative is of the highest videogame calibre

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Armour now alters Geralt's look, giving him a mage's hood or knight's breastplate, but he is not a customisable hero. This is still a character-driven tale, a roleplaying game in the more traditional sense of the phrase



The Witcher 2 proudly carries on the puzzlingly ubiquitous tradition of Scottish-accented dwarves in fantasy film and videogames, just as the original *Witcher* did. Other accents are mostly British, with the exception of Geralt and Dandelion



Out in the great outdoors, Geralt's medallion, mapped to the Z key, highlights loot and harvestable herbs for easy detection. Presuming that alchemy will be as compulsive this time as it was the last, it's a useful shortcut to have



All grown up

The original *Witcher* was occasionally so enthusiastic in its treatment of 'adult' themes that it turned a little cringeworthy – specifically, the oil-painted soft-pornographic sex cards that could be obtained from conquered women lent an embarrassingly adolescent air. Happily, Geralt's booty-call trading card collection is now history; he's still a bit of a womaniser, but sex should be a more natural part of the plot, and there are actual sex scenes rather than suggested notches on the bedpost. We assume that the conclusion of our quest with the succubus might have given us an idea of what to expect, had it not ended prematurely. So to speak.

super-buffed character to prevent us from dying unceremoniously.

The timed clicks for combos are gone – instead there are strong and weak sword hits on the left and right mouse buttons, with magic on a key. Pressing Ctrl cranks everything down to super-slow motion, letting you switch between equipped swords and spells. It's fluid, with much more of a realtime combat feel, but Geralt's artificially enhanced abilities prevent us from testing its limitations.

The spells themselves are familiar – Aard is a Force push, Igni a fire blast, Quen an electric shield. When we reach the tomb at the edge of the forest, Igni crumbles the unsteady walls to rubble, revealing a corpse for Geralt to examine. The dead elf carried a book of Dandelion's poetry with him; Geralt suggests asking the bard to lure the succubus out that night, nudging us gently back towards the village.

On the way back through the forest at night, an enormous spider blocks the way, and it seems prudent to run away as fast as possible: as *The Witcher 2* doesn't auto-scale its enemies, fleeing is still often the best choice. After another insult exchange with Dandelion, he agrees to tempt the succubus out of hiding with a recital of his poetry at midnight – after which the demo ends, leaving the quest unfinished. Presumably talking to the demon will reveal more nuanced options than simply attacking her immediately.

Tomasz Gop, the game's eloquent producer who has been looking expectantly over our shoulders for the duration of this demo, claims that he's seen almost as many variations on this quest line as he has playtesters. This may be exaggeration, but *The Witcher 2* definitely shows the same reluctance as its predecessor to shove the player down the straight paths of good and evil. Predicting the consequences of your decisions isn't always easy, and Geralt himself is certainly not clear-cut in the morality department. Importantly, *The Witcher 2* seems better able to draw players into its well-crafted fiction without troubling them with a confusing fighting system; it now feels far more like, say, a less punishing *Demon's Souls* than turn-based RPG combat. It's a promising change.





The revamped combat does not compromise on the game's difficulty, just its fiddly nature. The skill tree is still a sprawling, complex web of techniques and buffs



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Techland has nicknamed this character The Assassin. She may be dressed like a receptionist, but she's fast and deadly, making for a good choice in a co-op team









This isn't a developer that fears a mature rating. Not only are the zombies vile, they'll fall apart as you battle them, particularly if you're battering them with a blunt object

Dead Island

Techland's open-world zombie brawl may have a swish trailer, but does it have anything else?

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **DEEP SILVER**
DEVELOPER: **TECHLAND**
ORIGIN: **POLAND**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

Best known for western-themed shooter series *Call Of Juarez* (currently sporting a modern new look on p40), Polish developer Techland threw an undead cat among the pigeons with the release of the CGI trailer for its open-world adventure, *Dead Island*. The teaser, a non-linear, atmospheric mood piece featuring a zombie child, suggests a melancholy air and heart-wrenching drama. The game itself is unlikely to tug quite so hard on the heartstrings, offering a firstperson, fourplayer co-op melee-focused game complete with homemade weaponry and some particularly nasty zombie types.

It's easy to dismiss this as a sort of *Dead Rising/Left 4 Dead* mash-up, but Techland claims that's an unfair comparison. Nonetheless, *Dead Island*'s mission structure, built around story-progressing main quests punctuated by optional objectives, does seem a little familiar. There's a weapon-building system too, though it's less concerned with duct-taping chainsaws to kayak paddles than with the less ostentatious process of adding new components to basic items, like electricity to a machete. Blazej Krakowiak, Techland's international brand manager, compares it to the *World Of Warcraft* enchantment system. Building and maintaining your DIY weapons is important because, since the game is based in a holiday resort, guns are in short supply. The items you do find, meanwhile – planks, baseball bats and, if you're really lucky, the odd knife – degrade with use.

Turning firearms into an occasional treat should increase tension, but means much will hinge on how well Techland can handle firstperson brawling. At least some variety will be supplied by the game's cast. Each of the four playable characters – an ex-hip-hop star, a muscle-bound guy with a mohican, a glamorous hotel worker and a tough-looking female bodyguard – has their own special skillset. For instance Sam B, the rapper, has an affinity with heavy weapons like hammers, and can enter a 'fury' mode allowing him to deliver killer punches for a short period of time.

The game's sunny island setting is the source of plenty of macabre incongruity, the swimming pools, jungle, town and markets all smeared in a layer of gore. Occupying this world are your standard zombie type (often fresh from the beach in their swimwear), and a number or special variants. So far, we've only seen these in concept-art form, but they're suitably horrifying, and include the bloated, vomiting Drowner, the explosive, boil-ridden Suicider, the charging, straitjacket-wearing Ram, and the Butcher, which uses exposed arm bones as weapons. And it's not just the undead you need to worry about, with local gangs and looters offering something alive to fight with, too.

How the mix of open-ended action and narrative-tied objectives will work with four people playing at once remains open to question, but for now this is the most interesting thing to happen to the walking dead since Treyarch dressed them as Nazis, even if it's hardly likely to match up to the fantasies fired among the millions who feasted on its super-slick teaser.



Laws of the dead

"We're not trying to recreate a certain kind of movie genre, like voodoo zombies," protests Krakowiak as we discuss the rules of a zombie invasion. "Discovering what sort of zombie is in the game and what sort of unique twist we have is, of course, a huge part of the story, so we'll never ever reveal it before the game's release. We are following our own way, but of course remembering the zombie legacy that's out there and which we love."



While Logan here is toting a shotgun, most of the time you'll rely on more basic weaponry to fend off undead, and make your own at workbenches around the island



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Starting in LA and ending in Mexico, *The Cartel* promises a more varied series of locations than *Bound In Blood*, taking in neon-lit cities and more typical desert expanses

Call Of Juarez: The Cartel

Techland has taken its western-themed FPS series and dressed it in modern-day garb, but can it still stand apart?

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **TECHLAND**
ORIGIN: **POLAND**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

It's not just the old west that was wild. Or so Techland promises, having relocated the series to the present day. Out go the desperados, and in come the drug dealers. Out go the horses, and in come the Mustangs. Out go the saloon bars, and in come the… strip joints?

It's not that present-day California and Mexico do not have potential as settings for a western, it's that *Call Of Juarez* has sacrificed the one thing that made it unique in a heavily saturated FPS genre. The previous game, *Bound In Blood*, owed much to *Call Of Duty*, but the debt was less obvious when the guns were antique and the setting was so distinct from *COD*'s favoured theatres. Now that the gunfights take *The Cartel*'s three playable characters through nightclubs, rooftops and car parks, and the horseback riding's been swapped for jeep-based turret sections, *COJ* will have to work that much harder to stand out.

Both the first *Call Of Juarez* and *Bound In Blood* had a solid grasp of pacing, and it's in evidence here, too. The first level we're demoed – which sees *The Cartel*'s heroes on the trail of a drug dealer – takes the best part of 20 minutes to get started on the gunfights. Up until then, there's some protracted detective work, much of which appears to simply involve walking between cutscenes, but which occasionally becomes more involved. One driving section sees you trailing a suspect's car, and when said suspect arrives at a nightclub, it's a matter of going hand to hand with some stubborn doormen before you can slip inside.

When the bullets start flying, however, things seem more conventional. The battle which ensues has some rather dramatic set-pieces – at one point spilling out on to the thoroughly packed dancefloor – but is unabashedly built around *COD*'s template. The major distinguishing feature is a cover mechanic which highlights safe spots by placing a ghostly outline of your character over them, asking you to time your dashes from point to point with your companions' suppressing fire, as per their shouted instructions. Progression in this fashion leads to the gunfight flowing out of the club and into the streets, climaxing with a car chase stuffed with explosive, choreographed thrills.

In terms of sheer intensity, *COJ* has clearly benefited from being flash-forwarded to the present day. And Techland's argument that westerns are defined by tone as much as time period is certainly true. That tone, however, just happens to be one of the least promising things about the series' new look. The previous game's casts were a pretty flawed bunch, but still managed to be cartoonishly likeable. *The Cartel*'s male leads, by contrast, seem going for the hard-edged anti-hero vibe, but come across more like testosterone-soaked halfwits. There's a trashy vibe all round, in fact, a point driven home by one cutscene's sleazy, lingering shot up the skirt of a gyrating dancer.

Techland proved it could match Treyarch's ability to take the *COD* formula back in time with *Bound In Blood*, but now it's going up against Infinity Ward in the present day. And while *The Cartel* may well be able to go toe-to-toe with *COD* in a straight-up gunfight, it's going to have to work hard to replace the hard-earned spurs Techland has cast aside.



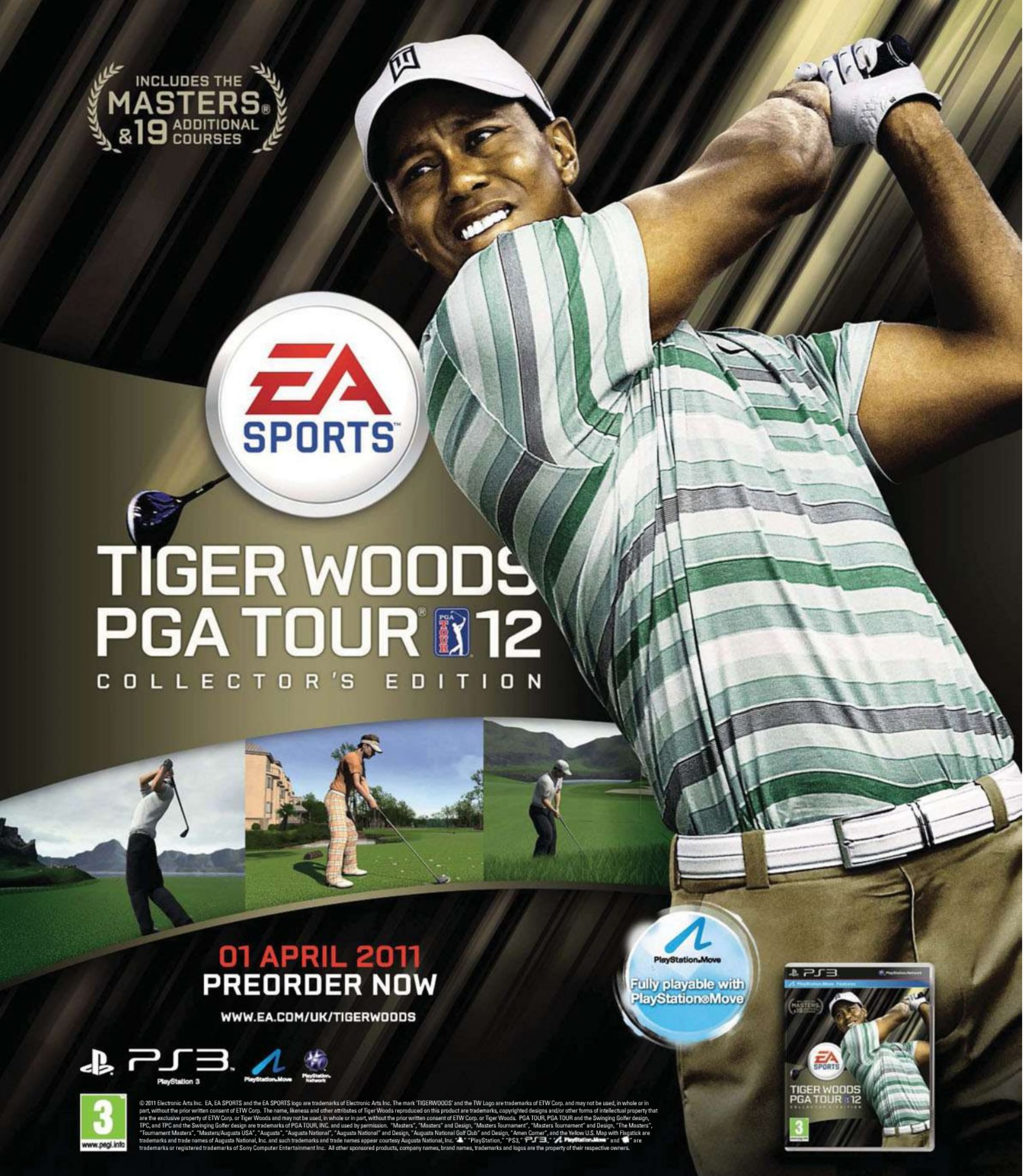
Big enough for the three of us

***The Cartel*'s three playable characters include cop Ben McCall, a Bible-quoting son of a pastor who's directly descended from the previous game's Ray; Eddie Guerra, a cocksure DEA agent; and Kim Evans, a straight-laced FBI operative who sneers at the lewd suggestions of the bad guys and nags her companions when they misbehave. Unlike previous games, all three will play similarly, though different characters may have slightly different routes or starting points in a level. Techland shows us one level in which Eddie and Kim are covering Ben by sniper rifle from a distance; Ben, meanwhile, will be defending himself at much closer range.**

So seemingly powerful are the McCall genes that Ben might as well be named Ray. He keeps his ancestor's temperament, but adds to it an even swearier demeanour – packing his Bible quotations with an excess of profanity



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New Detroit is a fairly nondescript city, offering a mix of open fields and identikit buildings. *Insect Armegeddon* looks more refined than the previous game, however



Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon

Aliens continue to bug the Earth as a US studio picks up Sandlot's discarded chitinous carapace

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **D3PUBLISHER**
DEVELOPER: **VICIOUS CYCLE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

You'd think, after the cult success *Earth Defense Force 2017* achieved, that all the adoration from a small but passionate fanbase could have gone to the series' head. Be reassured, then, that this is still an arcade-style shooter stripped of such pretentious novelties as slick graphics, high production values or even semi-competent voice acting. This is unabashed B-gaming, a notion confirmed at the beginning of our demo: a helicopter-based turret section taking place over a city that looks as if it's been made from cardboard and, pleasingly, falls to pieces like it too.

Part of the pleasure of *EDF* is that its budget production values and simple mechanics allow for the kind of emergence that a more complex game couldn't as consistently support. Shoot an alien ship out of the sky and it might crash into an overpass, which in turn hits the street, crushing the cars, bugs and houses below in an explosive domino effect. Missions provide a hint of structure, but they're mainly just an excuse to herd players from one still-intact piece of the city of New Detroit to the next – ensuring the collateral damage is maximised while the Earth's being saved.

The objectives we do receive focus on moving from point A to point B, and blowing up point B when we get there. En route we're harried by packs of the giant, genetically mutated versions of Earth insects that are the mainstay of the aliens' attacking force. *EDF*'s simple combat mechanics remain unchanged – you equip your soldier with two weapons at the outset of a mission, and then you're stuck with them. There's a basic drop-and-roll move, but nothing so flashy as a cover mechanic to keep combat interesting – *EDF* is happy to engage with players through scale and strength of numbers alone – and both are in evidence during our demo. An attempt to place explosives on a series of nests which are spewing forth both giant ants and irritating ticks (which latch on to the player before popping) results in a large-scale running battle across both the ground and sky before a pair of three-storey-tall alien mechs make an unexpected appearance. Turret sections punctuate the running and gunning, giving you an opportunity to hold off an oncoming tide of bugs and level the surrounding area in moments.

We're playing in singleplayer, but unlike its predecessor, *Insect Armageddon* will let players team up cooperatively online. The AI companions we're currently fighting alongside are dependable enough – they'll even attempt to revive you if they're still standing when you're downed – but an experience as exuberantly unsophisticated as this will no doubt be best shared. *EDF 2017* was something of a guilty pleasure – a one-note throwback lacking needless complication, but also lacking depth – and on the basis of what we've seen so far, *Insect Armageddon* looks unlikely to either surprise or disappoint.



As in *EDF 2017*, a recharging jetpack promises to let players appreciate the skyscrapers and the skyscraper-sized mechs stalking between them. The screen-filling giants we've seen so far are relatively small, apparently



Between the creature-feature giant bugs and their shiny alien overlords, christened the Ravagers by the humanity's remaining forces, *EDF* manages to squeeze in both of the typical B-movie approaches to extraterrestrial aesthetics



Insecticide

Before entering a level, players can extensively customise the appearance of their soldier as well as picking the weapons they'll take into battle. Accumulating experience will unlock tiers of weaponry, while individual weapons need to be purchased with cash earned during missions. While the sheer size of the available arsenal means some feel a little samey, there are some definite standouts – a rocket launcher whose shots divide into four more missiles, for example, or a shotgun with a spread so large our reticule fills half the screen. The inability to replace weapons mid-mission still irks, but it does encourage some consideration beforehand.

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FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA**
DEVELOPER: **INXILE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **JUNE 3**

Hunted: The Demon's Forge

Wanted: friend to help fight demons, loot treasure and make sarcastic quips





E'lara's bow offers extra distance, while Caddoc is usually found up to his knees in corpses. Both have to mix it up sometimes, though, and share many abilities and tactics



The crucible

Although the bulk of *Hunted* is its main quest, there will be a level editor called Crucible on the disc too. Details about this are currently trapped in Not Talking About That Yet limbo, with the following exceptions: it exists, it's in the game, and you'll use gold collected while playing through the game to buy things in it. That is all anyone knows.

We can easily guess the rest, though. Expect traditional Lego-style map making, and not much in the way of narrative possibilities. InXile may yet find a way of doing something more advanced on a control pad and, if so, we'll happily admit to being surprised when it comes out in June. The big unanswered question is whether or not created levels will be local/friends only, or downloadable. If the latter, it could give *Hunted* the longevity boost that its singleplayer campaign appears to need.



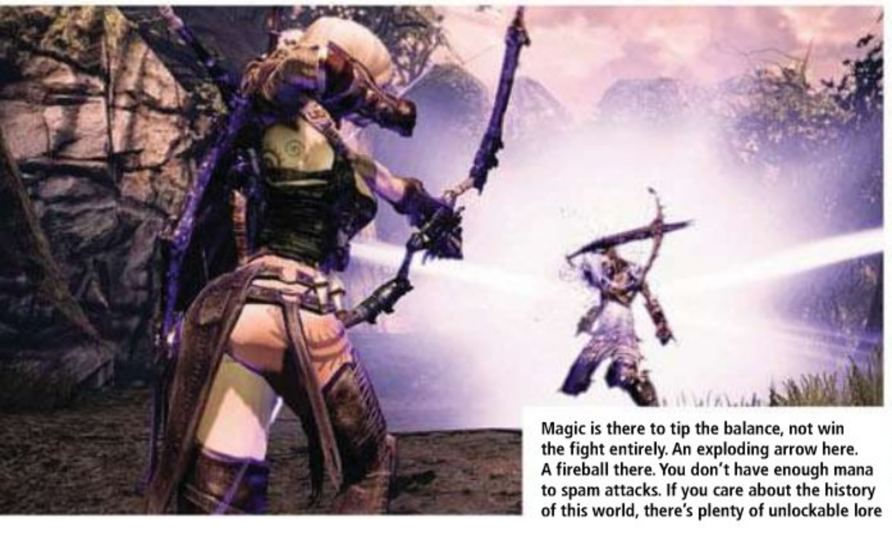
Playing through a couple of levels of Bethesda's cooperative hack-and-slash adventure, *Hunted*, is a great reminder of just how much better games are with friends. It's hard to see many people getting too excited about the singleplayer mode, in which you kill things with an axe and occasionally change character to kill some other things with a bow. It's not particularly pretty, the combat feels adequate at best, and the only real spark is that the characters are snarkier than your average under-dressed RPG heroes.

In multiplayer, though, it starts finding its feet. Here, one player controls Caddoc, a warrior who looks like his favourite meal is raw steak with a side order of steak, while the other plays E'lara, a ridiculous-looking archer girl who jiggles around Fantasyland like two bowls of jelly on a bouncy castle. He does melee, she does ranged, and both dabble in magic (with spells that can provide temporary charges and buffs for the other player). Only one, however, is likely to have a career as a DeviantArt pin-up come the game's release in June.

This pre-fanbase fan service aside, the two of them have an excellent rapport, which doesn't simply add a sarcastic tone to the quest, but encourages you and your friend to take a lighter view of the game yourselves. True, *Hunted* may lead to actual murder after one too many players realise that E'lara effectively gets a 'Press B to Nag' prompt every time the player controlling Caddoc isn't doing what he's supposed to, but the humorous asides, references to their previous adventures and outright ribbing are fun.

For all the lightheartedness, though, *Hunted* is an unforgiving game – at least on the evidence of this demo. You are only able to revive the other player if you have restorative phials on your hip, making it very easy for both characters to be sent back to the previous checkpoint. This is deeply odd, as even if you enjoy replaying the fights and savour a good challenge, nobody ever wants to hear the same jokes a hundred times. Generic RPG dialogue is ignorable. Recycled comedy is pain.

The combat is interspersed with simple puzzles, and exploring off the beaten track will occasionally unearth secrets, but *Hunted* doesn't look to be breaking any ground as a hack-and-slasher, or be a game you'll feel compelled to go through more than once. That first time through could be entertaining, though, especially as you can opt to do it either online or via local splitscreen. As a singleplayer game, however, we suspect it'll feel similar to throwing a fantasy-themed party without bothering to invite any of your friends.



Magic is there to tip the balance, not win the fight entirely. An exploding arrow here. A fireball there. You don't have enough mana to spam attacks. If you care about the history of this world, there's plenty of unlockable lore







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In 3D the game shines, bringing the sharp character models to the fore. Add motion control to the mix and you'll find yourself jumping around to avoid balls







Though the series began life in the arcades, and saw a coin-op release of *Virtua Tennis 3* in 2006, creator Kumagai says there are currently no plans to bring *VT4* to the cabinet crowd due to dwindling interest



FORMAT: **360, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

Virtua Tennis 4

Sega plays it safe as it serves up another dose of racketeering

The to and fro of tennis has been inextricably tied to the videogame form since *Tennis For Two* made its debut in 1958. In principle, if not execution, *Virtua Tennis* is a direct descendant of that game's no frills, addictive template. The inputs are simple – position your player and pick your shot – and the outcome is a tug of war that's at its best in short bursts of competitive play.

In a year that marks the brand's tenth anniversary on western shores, *Virtua Tennis 4* takes the 'best-of' approach: anyone versed in the lobs, slices and diving shots of the series will find an immediate comfort zone on the game's courts. Though the roster has changed to reflect current world contenders, the balance of characters, from all-rounder Federer to powerhouse Nadal, provide the same, admittedly slight, potential for strategy series veterans will know well.

Virtua Tennis' real ace, the minigames, return – and once again overshadow the Tournament and Arcade modes with their serious approach to high-scoring. Though series creator and producer **Mie Kumagai** tells us the minigame concept was sparked by a real-life player "lining up ball cans and knocking them down," *Virtua Tennis 4*'s couldn't be further removed from reality (and all the better for it). Whether you're hatching, gathering and protecting baby chickens with your headbanded avatar or just trying to smash plates for points, the collection of games is varied and inspired. More than just a pleasant distraction, they also provide a worthwhile avenue for training yourself in *Virtua Tennis*' arcade rhythm and controls.

Though the series has barely changed in its decade-long tenure, the way we play has and the fourth game caters to all mod-cons without letting them affect its core principles. In the main game modes, users are restricted to the use of standard controllers but in the separate Motion Play area, there's full Move, MotionPlus and Kinect support. Motion Play is ultimately a tech-demo of how motion control can be applied to a tennis game. It's also strong evidence that Sony's Move can best cater to the genre: it's the only version that both gives an option to move up to the net and pinpoints the angle of your grip. PS3 owners are also the only ones who can experience the game on a 3DTV, which accentuates *Virtua Tennis*' crisp courts and beautiful character models. In courtside view the game arguably provides one of the best 3D gaming experiences yet.

Virtua Tennis 4 doesn't try to break the mould, opting instead to play to its strengths and bring its original formula more completely to current generation consoles than did 2009's iteration. The dues it pays to motion control are too slight to be worthy attractions on their own, but they're still solid proof that multiformat titles can deliver across all three devices.



The character models lack the detail and fidelity of a Top Spin rendition, but they're solid enough and the roster has been modified from 2009's line-up, with new players including world number 22 Philipp Kohlschreiber and Laura Robson

Partly moving with the times

The Motion Play portion of *Virtua Tennis 4*, which supports motion control, is limited but immediately enjoyable. The camera is thirdperson until the ball's in your half of the court, at which point it zooms to firstperson for you to deliver your shot. Your character moves to the ball automatically, a la *Wii Sports*' tennis, allowing you to focus on timing and aiming. No button presses are needed, meaning shots depend entirely on wrist action. It's an efficient use of motion, but it's a shame the main game modes – and the minigames – don't integrate it.

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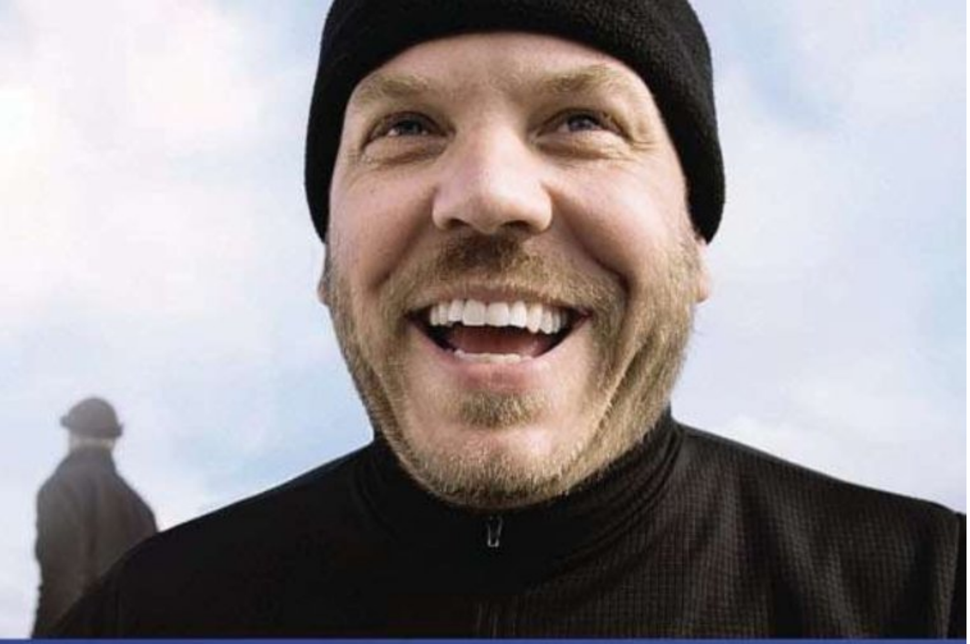
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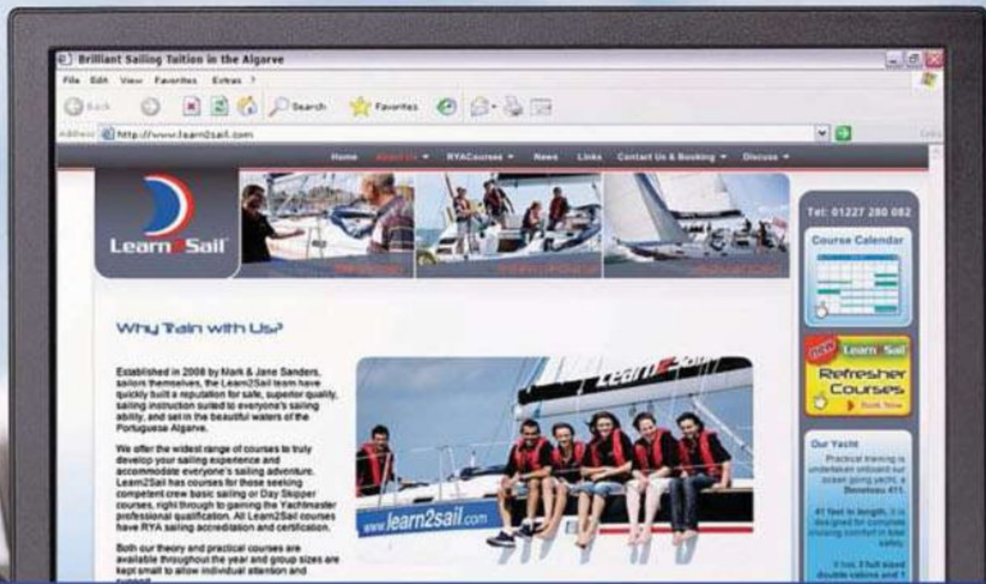
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SOUL SURVIVOR

HOW DO YOU FOLLOW UP ONE OF MODERN GAMING'S MOST CHALLENGING TITLES? BY SETTING OUT TO CREATE THE "MOST DIFFICULT GAME THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO MAKE", OF COURSE...

Hidetaka Miyazaki's desk isn't unlike that of so many Japanese videogame makers. A small army of rubber and plastic figurines battle for space with a PC, keyboard, mouse and an Xbox 360 development kit across its laminate surface. Bottles of sake and whiskey – birthday presents that haven't yet made it home – patrol the periphery, while pens, calculators and unopened games from rival developers stake their claim to whatever space remains.

The creator of *Dark Souls* – unofficial successor to 2009's most unlikely global hit, *Demon's Souls* – does, however, have at least one unique piece of desk décor: a Sony digital photo frame placed at the rear of his desk, facing outwards towards the neat rows of workstations at which his team toil away. You might expect the frame to cycle through images of his family, or snaps from a relaxing holiday to distract from the burden of fans' expectations. Miyazaki, however, loaded the device with hundreds of pieces of user feedback on *Demon's Souls*, quotations from players outlining what they loved about the game and what they hated, each statement sitting resolutely on the screen for a full 30 seconds before making way for the next.

For many, these daily reminders of past shortcomings might be discouraging, but in the context of *Demon's Souls*, they seem curiously appropriate. After all, here was a game that enabled you to help other players avoid pitfalls by scrawling words of caution on the ground, which then materialised, red and glowing, in their gameworlds. *Demon's Souls* also promoted punishment as the quickest route to victory, the relentless setbacks it heaped upon players intended to steel their resolve, not dissolve it; to educate and improve them, not dishearten. "I am a difficult director to work with," Miyazaki says with a wry smile. In fact, by that admission, Miyazaki is a difficult director, producer and game designer to work with, as on *Dark Souls* he has assumed all three roles.

"DARK SOULS IS NOT A SEQUEL TO DEMON'S SOULS. THE TWO GAMES ARE VERY SIMILAR, BUT IN TERMS OF WORLD AND STORY THEY ARE VERY DIFFERENT"

"It's how I've always worked," he explains. "It's just how I like to create videogames. I don't feel the pressure in terms of the workload. But I do feel the weight of expectation in providing a strong game. I actually love the pressure. I thrive on it. Perhaps in the future it will be different and I'll need to distribute the work among others, but at this moment in time, it's how I want to work."

Miyazaki may come across like an arch-auteur, and in many ways that label is applicable, but he is as eager to share praise among the rank-and-file workers as he is to show them what players think of their work. "I'm lucky enough to have an extremely talented team to back me up.

TITLE: **DARK SOULS**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI (US, UK), FROM SOFTWARE (JAPAN)**
DEVELOPER: **FROM SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2011**



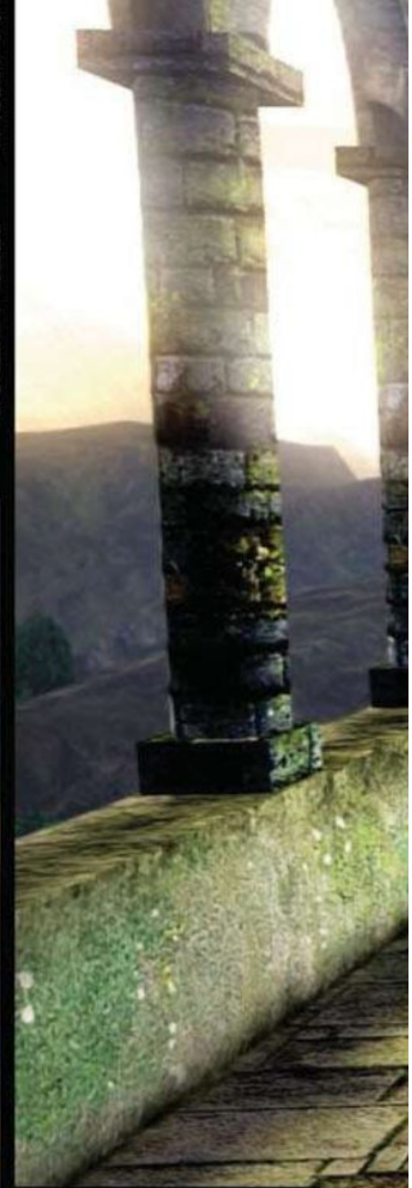
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The use of lighting has changed dramatically for *Dark Souls*, the muted, twilight skies of *Demon's Souls* making way for a range of distinct skyscapes





Dark Souls' terrors aren't necessarily all large, with many of the smaller humanoid characters inspiring keen fear in the unprepared warrior



Miyazaki (above) came to the industry late, joining From Software to work on *Armored Core: Last Raven* before being promoted to the role of director for *Armored Core 4*, *Armored Core: For Answer*, and *Demon's Souls*

If I come up with an idea out of nowhere mid-project, my team is able to take that and put it on the screen. Some of my ideas seem impossible to implement at first, so I am grateful for a team that continues to strive to fulfil all of my requests. The way I work is only possible because I have such a loyal and trusting team around me."

It's an approach that paid dividends with Miyazaki's first action RPG, PlayStation 3 exclusive *Demon's Souls*. The dark-fantasy game, heavily inspired by From Software's own 1995 title *King's Field* and the classic Fighting Fantasy roleplaying novels, cast players as a lone warrior thrust into a dark, foreboding world of red-eyed skeletons, hulking dragons and near-insurmountable odds. While the game may not have enjoyed lavish graphics, endless combos or firework displays of special effects, with its quiet innovations it caused something of a revolution.

Despite a very slow start – the game sold in the region of 30,000 copies in its week of release in Japan – word of mouth saw the game steadily succeed, first in its home territory, and then around the world, with hundreds of thousands of players finding wonder, rather than frustration, in the game's unforgiving depths. As such, a sequel seemed inevitable.

"*Dark Souls* is not the sequel to *Demon's Souls*." Miyazaki is adamant that his current game is a separate entity, despite it sharing not so much a similarity as a full likeness with his previous one. With a new publisher, however, it seems likely that the name change is a political one rather than a creative one. Regardless of how the developer spins it, the facts are that work began on *Dark Souls* immediately after *Demon's Souls* was released, that 80 per cent of the team is shared between the two projects, including all of the lead roles, and that, beyond similarities in character and enemy design, even the typefaces used on the loading screen are identical.

Regardless, Miyazaki refuses to be drawn. "It's not that we couldn't use the *Demon's Souls* name," he says. "It's that we chose not to use it. Thematically, and in terms of ideology, the two games are very similar, but in terms of world and story they are completely different."

While it would be an overstatement to say that *Dark Souls*' world is a departure from that of *Demon's Souls*, it is clear that efforts have been made to expand upon the unflinching gothic drabness of the first game. One area the director shows off reveals a castle kissed by a warm sunset, ivy draped lazily over cobblestones aged by time and footfall. It's similar to the medieval feel of the first game, but the lighting and foliage give the area a verdant refresh.

"IF WE TRULY GIVE THE PLAYER FREEDOM, AND ALLOW THEM TO GO ANY PLACE THEY WANT, THEN IT'S OUR JOB TO CATER TO THE PLAYER'S WILL"

Miyazaki is quick to point out that from this starting point a variety of game areas blossom outwards, ranging from whispering, mist-covered forests through to high fantasy peaks in addition to flat, smooth concrete spires and resolute

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SPICE OF DEATH

"In *Demon's Souls*, after you reach a certain point, the battle system becomes quite samey," Miyazaki notes. "The speed at which you can swing your sword after a certain level would be the same thereon in. In *Dark Souls* we've worked hard to get around that, to add flexibility over the long haul, allowing players to keep tweaking and amending their battle style."

obelisks. "The main aim was to increase the variety of locations that were found in *Demon's Souls*," explains lead artist **Sato Makoto**. "We wanted a far greater range of architecture types on offer; a sense of chaos, even, with different styles clashing together. Many ideas for locations came from influences that have nothing to do with fantasy, but are from my own personal experiences. When you draw inspiration from yourself in that way it's both exciting and frightening, as any criticism becomes far more personal."

It's not only Makoto's ego that's at stake. Every game area takes about six months to complete, so the investment of time, energy and money in each is significant. "We spend around two months just creating the assets for an area, getting the look and feel right, settling on the colour scheme and architecture we want to use," says Miyazaki. "During this period we carry out the structural designs in parallel. For the actual creation of the graphics, we plan roughly three months, which is then followed by fixes, tuning and increasing the overall quality. It's maybe not the most efficient way of working, but it works for us."

In contrast to *Demon's Souls*, the various regions of *Dark Souls*' gameworld connect seamlessly. The team is hoping to eliminate all loading screens from the game (apart from when your character dies) in time for launch. "It's an immense challenge that Miyazaki set for us," explains **Jun Ito**, programming lead on the game. He heads up a team of ten coders, who are in turn supported by an R&D team at the studio, creating tools and libraries to support the development. "Our task is essentially to predict the future," he says of the challenge to eliminate loading in the game. "If we truly give the player freedom within the world and allow them to go any place they want to, then it's our job to cater to the player's will.

"Will they advance with trepidation? Or dive into a cave they just found? Or perhaps head into a dense forest? In one moment a player might choose to climb a ladder to reveal a beautiful horizon, and in the next they could fall from the ladder to land in a deep dark cavern. We need to predict what you will be doing ten seconds on from where you currently stand, and then create the world around you in anticipation. Regardless of how hard it is to omit loading for us, we believe our task is to create a game in which people can explore the world of *Dark Souls* freely, without interruption. But, even so, can you imagine how difficult this might be?"

Nevertheless, it's a difficulty the team appears to have overcome, and with a high framerate, the boundaries for exploration have been widened seemingly without cost to other areas of the experience. "One of the core differences between *Dark Souls* and *Demon's Souls* is that the earlier game focused almost exclusively on battle and swordsmanship," explains Miyazaki. "I want this game to focus far more on the RPG aspect, especially with regards to rewarding player exploration. In fact, collaboration and exploration are the key concepts for the game." Certainly the team continues to excel at drawing our eye to points of interest and drama, not by way of a *Gears Of War*-style 'object of interest' camera button, but rather through careful framing that leads your viewpoint naturally.

As Miyazaki rounds one corner, we see a giant red griffon, ten times the size of his character, hunched atop a suspension bridge

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DIE-A-LOT TREE

Much of the game's tension and delight is found in the enemies that you encounter when roaming around its landscapes. From skeletons with red pinpricks for eyes to the rotund figure of the Onion Knight, the designs are never short of creative. "My hope is that players will be constantly entertained by the enemies they encounter," says lead artist Makoto. "My favourite designs are those that use trees as a motif. These are visually comical and so at first we were afraid that they wouldn't match the world. But many of the team members liked the design and we soon saw how frightening they looked in the dark. These are the ones I've come to like the most."





high above, craning its neck with half-closed eyes. It's a moment of simultaneous wonder and terror. Wonder that such a monster, framed in such a way, could look quite so striking, even appealing. Terror in the knowledge that, should you choose not to creep in silence through the network of tight, dank corridors underneath the bridge, praying to avoid detection, and instead run up the stairs for a head-on confrontation, your chances of survival are slight.

Demon's Souls defied prevailing game design fashions. Where other developers continue to fall over themselves rewarding players for the most humble achievement, here was an experience that demanded its player learn and master its systems or else face crushing setbacks. Players hone the skills necessary to progress in *Demon's Souls* through repetition. Each venture inches you a little farther into its dark world before death, which swiftly punishes the briefest lapse in judgment and slaps you back to where you began, forcing you to mount yet another attempt. It's a brutal approach that, prior to the release of *Demon's Souls*, had been largely consigned to history in action games, where fashion now equates ease of progress with best practice.

Demon's Souls, by contrast, appreciates the difference between lip service to achievement and genuine accomplishment. The thrill of overcoming one of its hard-hitting boss characters proves one of the most memorable gaming exploits in recent years. Nevertheless, the unforgiving nature of the experience prompted many to dismiss it as too difficult, too demanding to be considered entertainment. With that in mind, does From Software have any plans to make *Dark Souls* easier on the player?

"I have no intention to make the game any easier," says a defiant Miyazaki. "In fact, I want it to be more difficult. The way I put it to my team is that we are trying to make the most difficult game that it is possible to make, which at the same time can be conquered by those who persevere. It has to be firm, but fair. There's a contradiction there, I realise. As such, we have five key

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The low-slung camera angles may accentuate the sense of enemy scale, but even with a head-on view, these are tremendous foes



From Software's skill in level design is often to be found in its foreshadowing of great terrors (above) by way of orchestrated glimpses before you draw close (below)



criteria on which the difficulty level is judged. We want any player to be able to clear any obstacle simply by learning from mistakes and paying close attention. Then, the reasons for failure must always be clear and understandable. Every problem must have multiple solutions, so that players can tackle it in whichever way they want. The game's controls can never be a factor from which difficulty is derived. And finally, we want to make sure that there's the possibility for miracles to happen; those magical moments that spread stories outside of the confines of the gameworld.

"So long as an obstacle passes those five criteria, we are happy that we have achieved the maximum level of difficulty, while retaining the necessary element of fairness. Perhaps the final and most important test is that I am able to complete a task. I guess it's a little ironic for the creator of a game like this, but I'm actually not very good at action games. Nonetheless, that makes me a good benchmark for creating something that anyone can complete with dedication. In fact, I'm probably the worst *Demon's Souls* player on the entire team."

"I HAVE NO INTENTION TO MAKE THE GAME EASIER. I WANT IT TO BE MORE DIFFICULT. WE ARE TRYING TO MAKE THE MOST DIFFICULT GAME POSSIBLE"

Creating a game that is welcoming to newcomers yet can challenge those players who dedicate their lives to its mastery has always been one of the tallest challenges in game making. Makoto pulls a VHS tape from a brown envelope. "I was sent this tape this morning," he explains. "It's footage of some of the most dedicated *Demon's Souls* players completing the game using the weakest character class. This is the level of devotion that the game inspires."

Demon's Souls emboldens novice players via its asynchronous multiplayer system, whereby more experienced players can leave messages on any empty piece of ground, warning of impending dangers and pitfalls. A sort of in-game FAQ/camaraderie system that allows players to reach into the singleplayer campaigns of others, these messages prove invaluable when broaching new territory, and it's a feature that has been expanded for this pseudo-sequel.

Now, as well as warning other players of traps, or powerful monsters lurking around corners, it's also possible to trick fellow *Dark Souls* players. In *Demon's Souls*, messages were almost always used as generous advice. But now there's a keener competitive edge to the game, and the systems allow you to help or hinder those players around you. "It's how you play with people's minds, how you help or trick other people," explains Miyazaki. "It is another tool which has evolved in *Dark*

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Much emphasis has been placed on the tiered environment design, encouraging players to explore by dropping from a higher platform on to otherwise inaccessible ledges

The code used to render assets has been totally rewritten for *Dark Souls*, allowing for higher polygon counts on both the environments and characters





Souls – it's not necessarily about how skilled you are, but how smart you are."

For the magnanimous, it's now possible to assist other players by lighting a beacon of sanctuary in the gameworld and leaving recovery items there for other players to visit in their own campaigns, sharing assets and items, not merely words of advice. For Miyazaki, this detached use of co-operation remains his favourite feature in the game. "I'm the type of person who becomes very attached to the games we create," he says, "and so there are several aspects of *Dark Souls* that I love. But if I were to name a favourite, it would be the beacon-fire system. When playing in a dark, cold, gloomy world, the one place where the player can get some rest is the brightly lit, warm beacon fire. That players can set these fires up for other adventurers playing in their own game adds to the sense of co-operation, even if it's in a remote way. This is the feeling that probably defines *Dark Souls* more than any other."

Part of *Demon's Souls*' appeal in Japan was the way in which the game allowed players to work together or against each other, but in an isolated manner, without the need for the vocal interactions that typify western multiplayer experiences. Once again, this innovative feature makes a return, except this time players are connected not via servers, but dynamically with those who are playing around them geographically in the game.

Player vs player makes a return too, meaning it's possible to invade another's world in order to help or hinder, one of the few times this essentially singleplayer game (albeit one with collaborative features) begins to look more like an orthodox multiplayer experience. And for a weaker player being tracked by a stronger foe? Miyazaki has a solution: a new ability to disguise yourself as an inanimate object within the gameworld, and hide via transforming into, for example, an innocuous-looking broom or barrel.

While the game can be played mostly as a solo adventure, there are some missions that demand visiting other players' worlds, as Miyazaki explains: "For example, one player may be tasked with hunting down a certain item that another has in his or her possession. There will be several quests or missions in the game like that. It's usually posed a bit like a competitive version of Lord Of The Rings in which one player has the ring and the other characters must find him, attack him and attempt to claim the ring for themselves.

"These kind of battles are built into the game. It ebbs and flows seamlessly between single- and multiplayer, so that those distinctions are no longer really relevant. I think we have found a delicate

"I THINK WE HAVE FOUND A DELICATE BALANCE IN WHICH SOMETIMES PLAYERS MUST COMPETE AND SOMETIMES THEY MUST COOPERATE"

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Once again, the image of a lone, wearied warrior, like the one who featured on *Demon's Souls*' Japanese box art, is a theme revisited here, reflecting the sense of player journey



ROLL THE DICE

At first sight, the new emphasis on roleplay will appear slight. As in *Demon's Souls*, you begin by choosing a character class (currently one of ten, according to Miyazaki), which sets your basic attributes. Thereafter there's far greater flexibility in the type of character you can grow into. In contrast to *Demon's Souls*, Miyazaki and his team have worked hard to ensure these character choices prove more integral to the story that unfolds for each player. And then there's the issue of voice chat, or lack of it: "It is very difficult to get the players to actually roleplay – to pretend like you are a warrior, or a vampire. It is embarrassing and becomes a barrier to enjoyment. So by not having realtime voice chat there we are hoping that it will be a lot easier for users to take on the role and see other characters and understand that they are a vampire, they are a soldier and so on."

balance in which sometimes players must compete and sometimes they must cooperate. That tension is interesting to me." It remains to be seen how *Dark Souls*' design will accommodate players who lack the capacity to play online and experience its multiplayer components.

As in *Demon's Souls*, death is a core theme of the story, although there is no purgatorial Nexus as such. "The characters that you play as used to exist in the human world," Miyazaki explains, "but somehow they were cursed and made undead, and transported to a different dimension, a third world, the world of *Dark Souls*. In this dimension characters have their own individual goals that they are pursuing, be it to find their way back to the human world, or something else."

There's an overarching tension to the story too, as over the course of the game your character's mind deteriorates. "If the mind becomes too far gone then the character will become a zombie or monster," explains Miyazaki. "That is what you are fighting against in the game; this curse of not being able to face death. Within that framework we are really trying to give the player the freedom to pursue their own goals, be it to help all of the other characters, or to lift the curse that's befallen them or even to cause all-out destruction in this dimension. We've provided the base and the tools. From then on, it's up to the player to create their role."

Does that mean there's no endgame, we wonder? Any game constructed from non-linear, optional goals doesn't fit easily within the traditional win and fail states of most games, especially one that is attempting to scrub away the boundaries between single- and multiplayer. "Yes, there will be a way to 'finish' the game," says Miyazaki. "In fact, there will be several ways to end the game, similar to how it was in *Demon's Souls*. But the endgame is not really the focus at all. In a sense, I dare not require a player to complete the game. There is a completion point, but it's a game where the user can choose not to complete it, just live in this world for eternity."

Hoping that players will continue to play your game for 'eternity' is ambitious, to say the least, but it's a desire that reflects Miyazaki and his team's unflinching belief in their game. Having struck gold with *Demon's Souls* simply by adhering to its own vision, From Software is in the enviable position of having a global hit that has found popularity precisely because it bucks trends and ploughs its own furrow away from current notions of what a blockbuster should look, play, sound and feel like. Miyazaki is the keeper of the secret formula, and he knows it.

So what is the secret? "As in *Demon's Souls*, our aim is to have the player feel rewarded simply by playing the game," he explains. "Not for completing a quest. Not for finding a prize. Not even for winning loot, but simply by experiencing and playing the game." And – if *Dark Souls* is as difficult as promised – replaying and replaying *and replaying* the game, too. As its predecessor proved, when failure becomes its own reward, it's easy to get hooked on the hard stuff.

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PET PROJECT

TEAM ICO BRAVELY IGNORES THE POPULAR ADVICE ABOUT NEVER WORKING WITH CHILDREN OR ANIMALS, AS BOTH FIGURE PROMINENTLY IN THE DEVELOPER'S MUCH-ANTICIPATED PS3 DEBUT

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There's a moment very early on in *The Last Guardian* in which the boy – a colour-coded echo of *Ico's* horned protagonist – cups his hands and calls out to his giant feathered companion. And, for no obvious reason, your heart breaks. Partly it's the animal's indifference (their relationship is still forming, after all) and partly it's the bracing resolve shown by the boy himself as he cajoles the beast into action among the haunted stone ruins, too much responsibility heaped on his slender, accepting shoulders.

This is the magic of Team Ico, the Sony Japan studio we're here to visit in Tokyo. The studio is also responsible for the PlayStation 2 titles *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, a pair of emotionally sophisticated and artistically groundbreaking games. *The Last Guardian* shares their minimalist visual design – a pale palette of light and shadow – and a pervading atmosphere of thick, creeping quiet.

Thanks to Team Ico's small numbers and lengthy production cycles, this is its first PS3 title (Sony studios head Shuhei Yoshida calls it his Olympic Team, as it produces every four years – although this time it's been five). Having made the most beautiful games on PS2, there's much interest in what the team's latest will coax out of PS3. As soon as the gameplay demo begins, it's obvious *The Last Guardian* will be special.

The boy is creeping up on the sleeping creature – called Trico, both a nod to *Ico* and a portmanteau of the Japanese words for bird (tori) and cat (neko) – on the ground floor of a ruined greystone castle. Sunlight breaks through the broken floors and absent roof, creating a glowing patch of bright green grass at the centre of the room's dark shadows. The whites are over-saturated, the blacks impenetrably murky; the effect is like bleary eyes opening against bright daylight. Into the murkiness float luminous butterflies and sparkling specks of dust or pollen, giving the air a tangible, textured quality.

The boy tries to wake Trico, whose head stands a little taller than he does. He tugs on the beast's folded dog ears, but has to shout before the animal slowly stretches, yawns and rolls to its feet. It looks simultaneously realistic and artificial – uncannily natural in motion, but at the same time a physically impossible amalgam of parts. Trico is both alien and familiar, a feline body covered in feathers, with webbed feet and a canine head rounding out into a beak-like snout.

He's also huge, a factor that's crucial to his relationship with the boy. At the controls for the demonstration is Team Ico's chief creative director, Fumito Ueda. It's easy to marry this quietly intense 40-year-old with the games he's masterminded – he's focused and soft-spoken, but also authoritative. He explains that the dynamic in *The Last Guardian* is an expansion on those found in his earlier titles. Because of their differing sizes and abilities, Trico and the boy must find different paths through certain areas – like Ico and Yorda – and their growing relationship mirrors Wander's attachment to his horse Agro in *Shadow Of The Colossus*.

For now, though, Trico looks decidedly ambivalent. The challenge in this opening area is to aid the boy's ascent past balconies, suspended chains and walkways, to a switch mechanism on one of the higher levels. To do this, he needs Trico's help. Ueda explains how certain items in the world act as bait for the creature, as the boy waddles into a corner and picks up a steaming vat of purple liquid, his bow-legged heave recalling Ico's strained steps while carrying barrels and bombs. Gasps of delight erupt from the assembled journalists when the boy turns back toward Trico, whose massive head is now poking eagerly through an arched doorway, clawed paw reaching around the side, trying to get close to the boy and whatever he's holding. The logical implementation is also very much in the style of *Ico*'s satisfyingly rational problem-solving: the boy climbs a set of stairs and throws the bait over to a balcony on the other side of the room. Trico turns and rears up, putting his front legs on to the balcony

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TITLE: **THE LAST GUARDIAN** FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE** DEVELOPER: **TEAM ICO** ORIGIN: **JAPAN** RELEASE: **TBC**

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There's more to Trico's design than a wistful amalgam of the feathered and furry. Ueda has also conceived of his age and temperament – when first met, the creature is adolescent, which explains his initial aloofness

as he hunts for his treat. Suddenly, he's a feathered ladder – and the boy is on his way.

As Ueda notes, all of his games have featured a strong relationship with a non-player character. This one, however, is different: where Ico and Wander were protectors and aggressors, *The Last Guardian*'s boy is too small to fight. The room the boy comes to next demonstrates this. It features a guard in thick, intricately patterned body armour that covers his face entirely. The boy adopts a stealthy approach, crouching behind a low wall as the camera leans in so he fills the left-hand side of the screen. The gameplay here looks simple – the guard patrols, while the boy looks for a pattern and evades. If he's spotted – which in this instance he is, and it doesn't look like Ueda means to have been – he runs. The boy is faster than the guards, his white, one-shouldered tunic flapping and his body leaning forward as he flashes through the dimly lit room, frantically searching for small openings or climbable chains to help him lose his lumbering pursuer.



To dispose of guards more permanently, the boy relies on Trico's strength and size, introducing a powerlessness that makes just watching the game emotionally taxing. It's a reversal that forces player engagement with Trico, making him more than just a tool or a mechanism. You need him to like you. Ueda says that, as the relationship develops, Trico's expressions and mannerisms change – something that gives new significance to the handful of *The Last Guardian* trailers teased out since its announcement. At last year's Tokyo Game Show, crowds saw Trico bowing his head as the boy patted his nose, and earlier, at E3 2009, the two were wrapped up together in a warm, sleeping heap.

As he plays, Ueda stresses that he wants this relationship to be natural and direct, for players to respond to the needs and understand the mood of Trico through facial expressions and behaviour alone. Recent games have featured heart-tugging human/animal interactions, such as keeping adopted stray Dogmeat alive in *Fallout 3*, and enjoying the unconditional love of your canine companion in *Fable II* (did anyone really choose not to resurrect him at the end?). But these are one-sided exchanges and, crucially, superfluous to the main thrust of the story and gameplay. Even in the case of *Red Dead Redemption*, in which horses not only become loyally bound to hero John Marston but see him relying upon them for transport in the game's wide open spaces, the animals are replaceable, interchangeable objects. *The Last Guardian* is after something more profound.

It's probably no coincidence that *Red Dead* is one of a handful of games found in a stack beside a television in a corner of Team Ico's unusually barren single-floor studio. Ueda has confirmed that his team

THE BOY RELIES ON TRICO'S STRENGTH AND SIZE, FORCING PLAYER ENGAGEMENT AND MAKING HIM MORE THAN JUST A TOOL OR A MECHANISM. YOU NEED HIM TO LIKE YOU

MASTERS REMASTERED

Though *The Last Guardian* is the centrepiece of our visit, Team Ico also demonstrates the newly updated re-release versions of *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*. Both titles are now presented in HD and stereoscopic 3D, with varying degrees of success. While *Ico* still plays beautifully, it benefits the least from the retooling. The higher resolution brings a welcome clarity to what now looks a foggy original, but the effect of 3D seems limited to occasional sweeps over the castle walls. *Shadow Of The Colossus* is a different story. Where the original suffered from limited draw distances, the update has views stretching to the horizon and, even better, the 3D is excellent. This is a game built around scale, and it's an element that is underscored heavily by the new 3D effects.



Wooden lifts, levers and trapdoors look likely to form the basis of *The Last Guardian*'s puzzling, much as they did in the similarly styled *Ico*. There have also been glimpses of *Ico*-style train carts pushed along tracks

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The boy carries one of the large containers he uses to prompt and cajole Trico. Compare the intricately detailed interior here with the HD re-release of *Ico* and the step up in terms of visuals is obvious

THE OLD GUARD

***The Last Guardian*'s plate-armoured sentries may hold clues to the wider world of the game. In practice, they seem to function much like *Ico*'s shadow monsters, grabbing the boy as the shadows snatch Yorda, giving him time to wriggle free before he's fatally trapped (the animation of the boy kicking his legs while held over the guard's shoulder is a light-hearted touch). A closer look reveals that they may have even more in common with *Ico*'s supernatural enemies – the traditional kabuto helmets covering their faces are extended at the top of the head, giving room for a pair of eerie, yellow eye sockets, suggesting that demonic forces are at work in this world, too.**

is in full production now, ahead of the game's year-end release, after a long period of planning and design. But that team still only numbers around 35 staff – a miniscule headcount for a production of this scale – and the office is remarkably unremarkable. There are no desk-sprawls of toys and posters, no splashes of promos and posters on cubicle walls. The calm of Ueda seems to have filtered into his surroundings and staff. Scanned from the doorway this could be any open-plan, strip-lit office. Instead it is where a group of people are making one of the world's most eagerly anticipated games.

Back in the demo room downstairs, the boy is nearing his goal. He tiptoes across a thin plank laid over a large drop, and clambers up a clanking chain. The animations are vivid but fluttering, the game's dreamy lighting effects making his motion look almost like a hand-cranked silent film. The cloth wrapping his body flaps gently until he runs, when it moves like a kite caught in the wind. He finally makes it to the large switch at the top of the room and activates it. Second later, Trico bounds to the same level, his bulk collapsing wooden beams and partial floors in a dusty cacophony, taking just seconds to complete a journey that took the boy several exhausting minutes. It's the almost comedic reiteration of the lopsided relationship underpinning *The Last Guardian* – an epic mismatch of size, strength and intention, eased by a growing fondness – that lays the groundwork for this sublime, unique adventure.







The boy glows a solid bright white in *The Last Guardian*'s brilliant sunlight, showing the detail in both his dress and the tattoos on his arms. Has this boy been marked in the same way Ico was marked by his horns?

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GUARDIAN'S HERO

FUMITO UEDA TALKS ICO, TRICO AND HIS PLANS FOR FUTURE PRODUCTIONS



Team Ico's creative director **Fumito Ueda** (above) has created some of modern gaming's most aesthetically distinctive experiences, embracing minimalism while most other developers chase ever-greater levels of bombast. Here, he tells us where his imagination will take us next, via *The Last Guardian*.

***The Last Guardian*: could you explain the meaning of the name?**
Well, this something that's at the very core of the game, so I can't talk about it. Not that it's too soon, but it would spoil the core of the game's scenario.

While you've maintained similar creative principles from one game to the next, each has a distinct overall form. What is *The Last Guardian* about?
I'm not so sure my games are so different. It is each time about a constant communication between the player and an NPC character as the scenario is unfolding. The first game was about leading and protecting a female character, while the second was about fighting. This time, it's about cooperation. So, the form varies from one title to the next, but the theme is the same.

Are you exploring that theme, or refining it to achieve a larger goal?
It's not a real goal, but I want to create a character that is as perfect as possible. I mean, as natural as possible. I'd like players to feel it's really alive. In that sense, it's not really about refining a concept or exploring every bit of its potential. I'm certainly trying to make that perfect living character.

Do you feel that you're getting close?
Not really – I think I still have a long way in front of me.

Do you attribute that to any limitations of the PS3 hardware itself?
This is a great platform that has a lot to offer, but it's not a question of machine power. It's more about how you get emotions out of a virtual character. All my games feature a wall. In the first, it was about language, while the second was more about the thinking. This time, it goes beyond that, with a creature that can't speak and has its own behaviour. So they were about situations. I'd like to come to a point where I could really communicate with a character through words in a very natural manner.

This isn't the first time you've created a game featuring a young boy as a hero. Is there any particular message or concept you're trying to express with this choice?
Well, *Shadow Of The Colossus* had a more grown-up hero; it's not something that I'm pursuing at all. In the case of *The Last Guardian*, Trico was the one that was supposed to fight, so I chose a boy as the hero because I could get a balance between both. He's too small and too young to fight, so you create that relationship. Also, a young hero can feel close to a wide audience of users.

People have characterised *Shadow Of The Colossus* as a prequel to *Ico*. Is *The Last Guardian* related to *Ico*?
When I was making *SOTC*, there was no link with *Ico*. I mean, I made the game with no relation between the titles in mind. That link came later.

"I WANT TO CREATE A CHARACTER THAT IS AS PERFECT AS POSSIBLE. I MEAN, AS NATURAL AS POSSIBLE. I'D LIKE PLAYERS TO FEEL IT'S REALLY ALIVE"

As for *The Last Guardian*, I'm not making the game with any link in mind.

Which aspect of the game's development has proven the most challenging?
With *Ico*, the way the AI was implemented was a challenge, and in *SOTC*, the way you could climb those bosses was another. In this game, I'm implementing both together while applying a huge brush-up that pushes the PS3 to its limit. This is quite a task, and we still have a lot of work to perfect it.

How did you decide on Trico's design?
We tried different models, settling on the one you see here after making various comparisons and evaluations. It looks cute in some cases, threatening in others. It feels strange and is capable of some acrobatic actions as well. Each part that it's made of brings some abilities, and this acrobatic capacity comes from its cat DNA.

Presumably the entire Trico creation process formed a large part of your R&D work.
We did not need much time to make the original model. We worked on it for a month. The problem, or the challenge if you prefer, was to make it behave. We spent years to get to what you see today. I have a cat and that may explain some of Trico's design but, while I could have given the creature most of a cat's behaviour, I thought it was limiting for the character to simply be modelled after a cat. I wanted it to be more, to do more, to express more. Cats have a given behaviour and they react a certain way. We had to add other animals' attributes to allow Trico to perform actions that a cat won't.

Trico is huge compared with the boy. It has its own behaviour and life in the sense that it isn't there to look after the boy all of the time. Are there times when it can become a source of danger, however unintentional, for the player?
There are situations in which it will behave and the consequences of its actions may be dangerous for the boy. Now, there's nothing in the game that will allow the player to make Trico angry so it will attack. There are elements that I can't talk about, for fear of spoiling the story of the game, that will in a way confront the boy and the creature.

Is Trico the only gigantic animal in the game, or are there others?
Well, this is another element that I can't talk about but… maybe.

Does Trico change over time?
There will be some slight changes, but there won't be any that will impact the course of the story or the feeling of the game.

Minimalism has served as a guiding principle for both your game mechanics and your narratives. What appeals to you about this approach?
I quite like this kind of game, but I also feel this is the right approach to reach people who aren't necessarily familiar with videogames. I believe that games in which you have tons of items, in which you customise your character in many ways or in which stats have to be managed constantly, aren't really accessible to people who don't play much. That's why I prefer this kind of very simple experience. Now, from a creative perspective, a simple experience allows me to really focus on the few elements that are going to be essential to the game. I can spend all the time to make sure that they'll be the way I want.

In *Shadow Of The Colossus*, the groans of the Colossi makes killing them a melancholy experience. Few games inspire complicated feelings about killing enemies, especially non-human ones. Why do you think this is?

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The Last Guardian's animations hold the key to its emotional power. Here, the boy leans backwards and looks up at Trico, the minimalist motion softly speaking volumes about the pair's interdependent relationship

Colossus was made to feature some violence, not from an action or visual point of view, but as a whole. Even the music was reinforcing this sadness after killing a Colossus. *The Last Guardian* is different, mainly because the hero is a boy who can't fight.

Your games could be seen as a reaction to the bluster of mainstream action titles – is that what you're aiming for?
I don't think that I'm trying to do anything different or as a reaction against a mainstream trend. I think that from a visual point of view, the game is pretty much in line with the market. But I don't think that my games are that different. I don't design and make them to mark a difference; they're just games like any other, I think. Of course the directions that I take when designing the games may be different from the market trends – I'm just looking where others are not – but I don't feel that I'm doing anything particularly unique with my work. In *The Last Guardian*, the young boy isn't fighting but the animal is. I'm just displacing the fighting from the player to the NPC that accompanies him or her.

***Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus* were both critical hits in the west, but fared poorly at retail. Would it bother you if *The Last Guardian* faced the same reception?**
Well, of course I'm happy that my games are anticipated and welcomed. I remember that *Ico* was not so highly anticipated, and *SOTC* wasn't a big commercial success. I believe that I'm still learning and gaining in maturity.

Game consumers often cry out for originality, but the sales charts show that ultimately they prefer the security of famous, well-established franchises. Does that bother you?
I think the problem is different. I believe the issue is with the product. The fact that *Ico* and *SOTC* didn't sell well is because they weren't good enough. They didn't have enough to appeal to users. *The Last Guardian* wants to learn from this. I'm making the game so that it's appealing, with the hope that many people will give it a try and love it.

In making *The Last Guardian*, which aspects of your previous games have been key to the way it's been designed?
Well, there were tons of them. It's hard to pick one out of the pack but, if I had to take one, I'd say it's something that isn't necessarily bad, but that I felt was really important to tackle. I have the feeling that there were too many moments in my games when you had nothing to do. In that sense, in *The Last Guardian*, you have far fewer blanks. In *Ico* there were many things that weren't really crucial to the game itself. With the experience now, I can focus more on the essentials. However, I don't think that having blank moments is necessarily a problem. If you just focus on the essentials, you lose some of your freedom in designing the game.

Some say that your previous games were a bit too short – what's your take on that?
In *SOTC*, I tried to offer some replay value with the time attack mode and extra items. I think it offered far more volume than *Ico*, for instance. Now, for *The Last Guardian*, my personal opinion is that I don't want to feature too much volume in the game. It's easy to expand the length of a game – you just have to add stuff like extra play modes. I don't want to do that. I prefer the player to enjoy the first play and maybe do a second. He may come back later to replay it because of the experience it offers, not for some additional features.

Is the world of this game pretty much contained in the ruins we've seen, or are there other places to explore?
It isn't entirely contained in this castle. You won't roam the lands, but there is a little bit around this castle. Not much, though.

The game seems to be a succession of puzzles set in rooms and areas. Since the creature has its own behaviour, does that mean you may have more than one way to solve a puzzle?
Well, it is very much a one-pattern solution. But I don't really like to call those situations puzzles, since that often implies switches and such. I try not to include too many of those mechanisms. Trico is the main problem-solver here.

Are there any markedly different types of game you'd like to explore in the future?
If I get the chance, there are things that I'd like to make or challenge myself with, yes. For instance, I'd like to make 2D games. Right now, that's what I'd like to do – it may change tomorrow. Oh, and an FPS. Yes, I'd like to make an FPS. I play quite a lot of FPS games in my free time.



Very little is known about the Aztec-influenced fortress in which the boy and Trico find themselves held captive. Ueda suggests that at least some of the game will take place outside of the fortress walls, though





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DIVINE INTERVENTION

EL SHADDAI'S TRIPPY SPIN ON THE OLD TESTAMENT AIMS TO MAKE THE ACTION GENRE FEEL NEW AGAIN. BUT WILL THE GAME SOAR, OR FALL FROM GRACE?

A wind-blasted landscape suspended in a void which, with every gasp of a fallen angel's breath, switches from bright white to inky black and back again. There are segues from 3D to 2D planes where what at first appears an action game becomes a tribute to '90s platformers and a control scheme which comes as close to one-button combat as an action game can attempt. *El Shaddai* is far from a conventional game. But we knew this, and came ready for surprises. What we weren't prepared for, however, is that five minutes into an extended hands-on session with the title, we're suddenly reminded of *Metal Gear Solid*.

The game opens with a boss battle, as the beautiful, golden-haired protagonist, Enoch, leaps from heaven to Earth to do battle with fallen angel Azazel. He doesn't last long, not when we're controlling him anyway, and blow by blow the angel strips Enoch of the pristine armour which represents his health bar and leaves him for dead, not 20 seconds after we began.

It's OK, though, because Lucifer is on hand to help out. Ignition's suave and smartly dressed take on the fallen angel – referred to as Lucifel – hasn't actually fallen yet, though God has blessed him with the power to control time. He uses it now, rewinding everything we've just experienced, not simply to the beginning of the battle, nor even to the beginning of the cutscene, but all the way back to the title screen, and it's this moment of self-aware playfulness that recalls Kojima's games.

There are one or two more winks aimed in the player's direction during our time with the game, but they're throwaway jokes, not sustained assaults on the fourth wall. That doesn't make this title screen rewind any less representative of the most important aspect of Ignition's game – you're never sure what you'll see from one moment to the next.

El Shaddai's visuals are its most striking feature – a world brimming with swathes of flowing, twisting, gleaming colours. But style isn't everything, and the game wraps its surreal aesthetic around some equally eye-catching scenarios. When we're given control of Enoch for the second time, he's standing on the palm of a giant stone hand, every finger of which is an ornately carved effigy of one of the fallen angels he's been sent to find. The hand descends from the heavens, depositing Enoch on an Earth that looks almost alien – with passageways carved from mauve rock and a shimmering, viscous-looking sky.

TITLE: **EL SHADDAI: ASCENSION OF THE METATRON**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SPRING (JAPAN)**



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FASHION VICTIM



While Sawaki has overseen the entirety of *El Shaddai*'s visual design, he's directly responsible for the character designs, with Enoch himself taking two years to finish. "I wanted to deliver something that a director who couldn't draw would struggle to explain", he says. "That's the kind of design I wanted for the hero of this game. When I design, I always see if I can describe my creation. When I was designing Enoch, I had to redo his design every time I felt I could just put his features in words." Enoch's jeans, incidentally, are a gift from the time-travelling Lucifel, and with a satanic grasp of advertising opportunities, Ignition has made them officially Edwin brand.

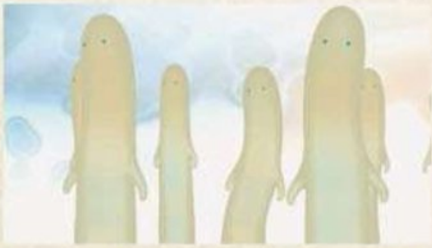


This isn't director and character designer **Takeyasu Sawaki**'s first distinctive-looking game. Before joining Ignition, Sawaki worked for Capcom, where he supplied character designs for the first *Devil May Cry*. Subsequently Sawaki joined the talent team behind Capcom's Clover Studio, serving as art director on *Okami* – a game celebrated even now for its aesthetic style. *El Shaddai*, however, marks the first time Sawaki has been placed in charge of a project. And if it's been a stressful experience, he's not letting it show.

"Being director is so much fun! I mean, I can impose my rules!" he exclaims. "More seriously, when I was art director, I had great responsibility on my shoulders. As director, I felt I was given more freedom. But of course the job does not come without its own set of responsibilities. You have to deliver. If not, that just means you lied all the time the game was in development."

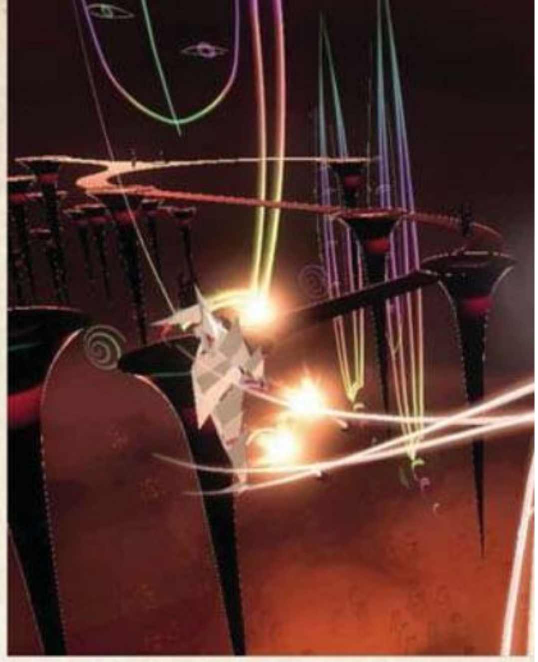
So what exactly is Sawaki trying to deliver? Games based on pieces of Old Testament apocrypha – in this case the Book of Enoch – don't fill an obvious niche, and *El Shaddai*'s unusual visuals and simple controls (more on those later) are anything but a straightforward *Devil May Cry* clone. Did the team set out subvert expectations? "That's a hard one," Sawaki says. "We wanted something new but that felt familiar. This is the kind of impossible mix that we tried to deliver. This is an industry that craves innovative approaches, but if you are too innovative you are criticised for going too far. It is very difficult to get the right balance."

Kashow Oda, producer at Ignition, adds: "We are trying to deliver a non-threatening videogaming experience, one users will feel comfortable with and which at the same time can introduce a very alien environment to the Japanese public – the Bible."





The nephilim (top) are the product of what the game refers to as 'unholy union' between the fallen angels and man. They might look cute, but they never stop growing, like to eat each other, and threaten to destroy the world. Many of Enoch's foes are divine-weapon-equipped humans (above) who worship the angelic villains



Viewed through the lens of simplicity and accessibility, *El Shaddai*'s visuals start to make sense. Many of the game's fights whisk Enoch away from the landscape and into abstract spaces – as our demo continues, we find ourselves battling enemies on a floating amber disc. It's disconcerting at first, but when the impact of the transition fades, we're left with a sparse and uncluttered arena for battle. It's an ethos which extends to less purely functional locations. *El Shaddai* offers stunning landscapes and unreal vistas, but never at the expense of easily comprehensible – and usually quite linear – level design. Describing a world as vibrant as this as 'minimalist' doesn't feel quite right, but comes closer than any other.

"I wanted visuals that would be very easy to understand," explains Sawaki. "When you want to do that, you need to get rid of many details. But you want to keep some impact as well. I wanted the environment to feel alive, so you have all those changing colours around. Today's games have quite mastered reality. You see cans rolling on the ground and grass moving with the wind. But we're now used to it. We want to deliver an environment that nobody has seen yet. I'm sure people are quite surprised when they first see our world, but it's not born from a desire to surprise people but from a very logical design." It's also, for Sawaki, the realisation of a long-held ambition: "I started with *Devil May Cry*, and since then I had this feeling that I was after something else. I was already wondering if the realistic visual approach was really the only one. Over the years, that feeling just got stronger. This project provided me with a level of freedom that gave me the opportunity to try that other approach I desired so much."

Complementing the visuals is an equally unusual score. Like Sawaki, lead composer **Masato Kouda** has a Capcom background – his first project was also *Devil May Cry* – and his work here sounds like being some of his best. Much of it is merely pleasantly appropriate – choral music picking up on the Judeo-Christian vibe, for example.

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Enemy designs are simplistic but distinctive, ranging from inky black spidery things with spindly limbs to crude figures which look as if they've been moulded from soft clay and not given heads







Occasionally, however, we hear something that rivals the imagination of *El Shaddai*'s visuals. It's almost no surprise, then, that Kouda has a rather synaesthetic approach to sound design.

"I took the colour of the game, which I identified as white. I always visualise my music with colours," he explains. "When I did the score for *Monster Hunter*, I saw lots of nature in the game and had green in mind. That colour translates into E-flat major. This time, white translates into C major. So I had no hesitation when making the music. I knew it would be in that key."

Late in our demo, Enoch enters a tower – the Tower of Babel, in fact. Beneath him is a vast cityscape – almost futuristic with its bright lights, fireworks and sodium glow. It's the music, however, which unifies this scene with its prehistory setting. Synthesisers introduce the vista, underscoring its anachronistic feel, before tribal drums and an accompanying chant kick in. Based on looks alone, this is merely a pleasant view – but Kouda's score intensifies *El Shaddai*'s affinity for the surreal.

For combat fans, however, aesthetics aren't the important part. The core of any action game is its control scheme – and *El Shaddai*'s is no less bold than its audio or visuals. If you're the kind of player who has *Devil May Cry 3*'s entire moveset imprinted on your muscle memory, you may want to prepare yourself for what's coming next.

"I think too many buttons is not the answer. I want fewer of them," explains Sawaki, and *El Shaddai*'s combat certainly reflects this ambition. Originally conceived as a one-button affair – though a few more inputs have snuck into the mix during development – fighting Enoch's angelic foes takes more than a little readjustment.

The countless hours you've spent with Dante, Ryu and a certain Umbran witch have honed instincts that aren't quite right for *El Shaddai*. The central principles hold – keep moving, pummel the bad guys when you can, don't get cocky – but Enoch feels different. He has a dodge, naturally, but it's a balletic spin away from danger, as opposed to Bayonetta's hair-trigger backflip. And while you'd definitely prefer to be on his side in a punch-up, Enoch's combos lack the taut control of those in rival games. You can still knock enemies skyward before keeping them airborne with a flurry of blows, but it all feels a little less precise and a little more flowing, prizing elegance over twitch-reflex intensity.

"WE WANT TO DELIVER AN ENVIRONMENT THAT NOBODY HAS SEEN YET. I'M SURE PEOPLE ARE QUITE SURPRISED WHEN THEY FIRST SEE OUR WORLD"

You're not even that powerful when you first enter a fight. Enoch must wrest weapons from his enemies' hands if he wants to stand a chance in a protracted battle, and doing so requires knocking foes into submission first. Despite the single attack button, mixing the timing and the rhythm of your presses will unleash a variety of different moves. Alternatively, hold down the attack button for a few short moments and Enoch will charge up an attack – get hit during this window and Enoch will counterattack. Chain enough attacks and enemies will recoil, stunned, and at this point Enoch can snatch a weapon – one of three available types – from their hands. He does it with a flourish too – vaulting over foes and wresting their crescent-shaped armaments away before he lands.

The weapon we've stolen is an arch – a bow-shaped, two-handed weapon with a stream of energy running from one end to the other, which Enoch wields like a sword. Once Enoch equips it, his moveset changes accordingly. Combos become flashier, and Enoch seems lighter on his feet, too – he naturally has a double jump, but now it can be extended with a gentle float towards the ground. Tearing through the remainder of Enoch's enemies with our new arch is no more complicated to control, but it's noticeably, satisfyingly, faster.

El Shaddai's combat doesn't provide the depth and complexity found in many of the aforementioned games, but that's a conscious design choice. The focus on rhythm and timing makes button bashing less useful here than in many ostensibly more demanding games, and, indeed, Ignition deftly implements moves which specifically discourage it. When enemies





Ignition producer Kashow Oda (top) and character designer and director Takeyasu Sawaki

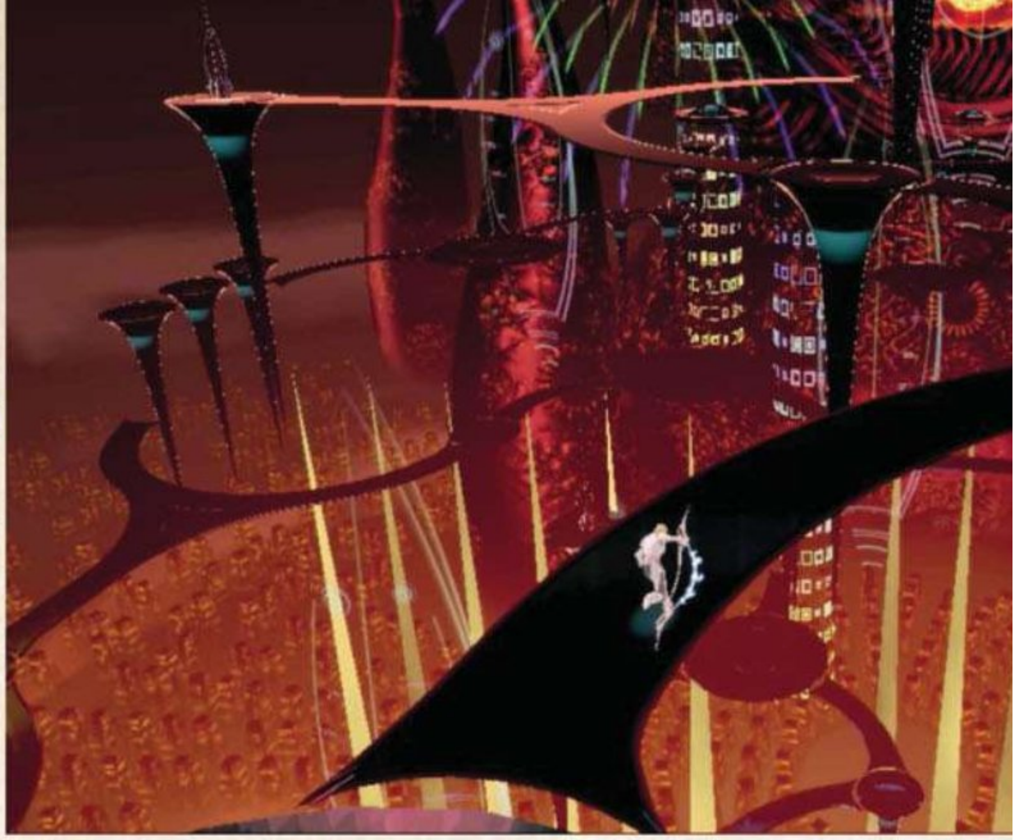
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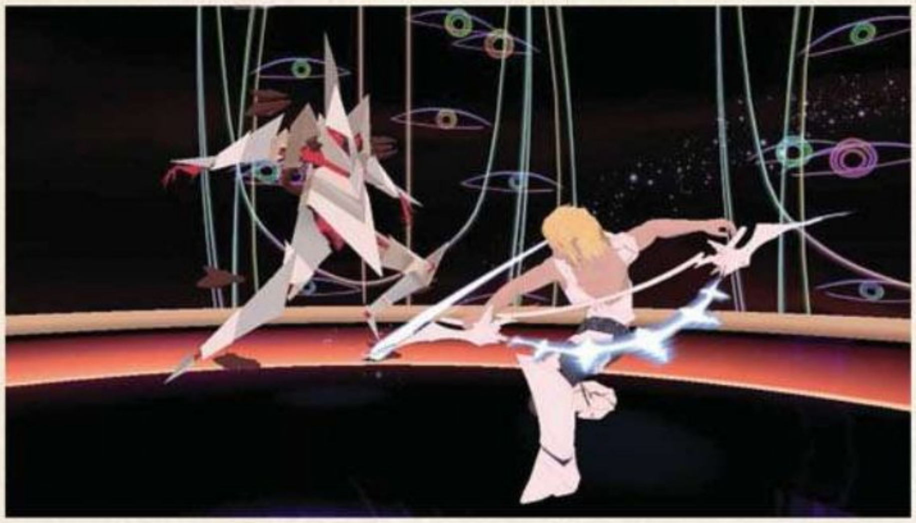


The platform segments are simplistic – though part of the appeal is appreciating the view. As Enoch journeys through the Tower of Babel he passes through realms under the dominion of different angels – justifying the range of styles









start blocking attacks, for instance, Enoch's guard break manoeuvre can only be activated by leaving a deliberate lull between two moves. Keep hammering attack, meanwhile, and you'll eventually end up on the receiving end of a counter. But still, Sawaki must be aware that combat purists may find *El Shaddai* a little lightweight.

"I can't say it won't happen. There may be users who will feel that way," he says. "But we have some clear objectives, especially in terms of accessibility. There was not one meeting when a team member did not remind me of the possibilities offered by more buttons. They complained they could not design a proper action experience. So I designed the weapon-steal system and the relationship between the three weapons."

The relationship Sawaki is referring to is a system which underpins all of *El Shaddai*'s encounters. As well as the arch, there are two other weapons in the game – the gale and veil. The gale looks like a glittering squadron of paper aeroplanes which Enoch can use to engage enemies from afar, and which also enables a zippy dash attack. The veil, meanwhile, is a pair of shields-cum-gauntlets which provide the obligatory slow-but-heavy combos, as well as offering superior defensive abilities. It's the rock-paper-scissors dynamic between the three weapons which aims to keep *El Shaddai*'s combat interesting. "The lack of buttons is balanced with the [weapon dynamic]," Sawaki explains. "I really believed that if these systems were properly designed and implemented, it would work."

"A GAME IS REALLY BORN AFTER YOU PLAY IT. ONLY THEN YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE A GAME OR NOT. I TRIED TO KEEP MY VISION DURING DEVELOPMENT"

Taking on the hulking, veil-equipped enemies with the projectile-firing gale is certainly the wrong approach. The gale's an intriguing weapon, allowing Enoch to keep enemies at range and switch between targets without having to move, but it's met its match here – our shiny little missiles fail to make much impact on our large, shield-wielding foes. That said, they do an excellent job of keeping the less brutish, more vulnerable arch-bearing bad guys under fire at distance – and once we've taken *their* weapon, we can turn our attention back on the larger threat. Now that we're sporting a shiny pair of giant gauntlets of our own, finishing off the veil-firing nuisances who've been haranguing us for the duration of the battle is a breeze.

The gale, arch and veil are, pleasingly for a game based on early Christian mythology, a well- balanced trinity, each offering a different take on *El Shaddai*'s simple set of moves. They're also intimately tied to the game's narrative, which concerns a rogue band of angels who elected to live as kings among men. Before vacating heaven, the angels stole an arsenal packed with divine weapons – and it's these Enoch's taking back now. One final tactical layer rounds out combat: the longer Enoch uses a weapon, the more 'corrupted' it becomes, moving from white and pristine to blackened and increasingly gnarled. A quick button press allows Enoch to 'purify' his weapons, but doing so takes a moment's breathing room.

"The need to purify your weapon is a way to vary the rhythm," Sawaki explains. "You could see it as being like a shooter – you need to reload your gun at some point. As in those games, because you know you are about to run out, you need to be more careful. You start to think about your approach very differently. If you had just a constant automated attacking experience,

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the game would feel dramatically different. The purification process adds this tension."

Ultimately, the success of *El Shaddai*'s combat system will hinge on the game surrounding it. If a varied assortment of enemies and challenges can be thrown in Enoch's path, and the player encouraged to tease out the flexibilities which are already present in its combat, then the absence of epic, finger-knotting combos is unlikely to be noticed. The boss fights could be a good start, certainly (see 'Angels and demons') but *El Shaddai* has one last unusual flourish – Enoch's journeys through the game's beautiful 3D environments are frequently punctuated by 2D platforming interludes.

"Ah, yes, well, I don't know if I should say it but… Nintendo… Nintendo love," jokes Sawaki, when we asked why these frequently beautiful and occasionally bizarre segments have been included in the game. "Ah, you said it!" interjects Oda, before explaining: "It's like a taboo. No one else dares to make a platformer in [Japan's game industry]. You can see this as a challenge."

In truth, Mario needn't worry. *El Shaddai*'s platform sections feel very different to those in Nintendo's games, but still provide a change of pace as well a new twist on the game's combat. Using the veil is particularly appropriate from a side on perspective – giving the sections a side-scrolling shooter feel – though the extended floating jump provided by the arch is useful, too. More importantly, Ignition's artists take to the fixed plane like painters to canvas, using the defined perspective to conjure a series of majestic sights. One platform section, early on, finds Enoch ascending a tower with a giant stained-glass window as the backdrop. Later we platform across clouds that rise and fall like waves along the bottom of the screen. Finally, we guide Enoch across a brightly coloured level which looks more like a SNES-themed hallucination than a segment from Ignition's Old Testament-inspired game.

El Shaddai can't help but feel like an experiment. As a new IP, it forgoes depth and complexity – the defining characteristics of the action genre – for elegance and accessibility. Not content with one bold and unusual art style, it shifts visual signatures from one scene to the next – often changing perspective along the way. And let's not forget that bold, unwieldy, full title. *Ascension Of The Metatron* might be a scripturally accurate description – but how many games task themselves with retelling time-obscured myths? Credit must go to Ignition for supporting its Japanese studio's bold flight of fancy, but it's hard not to get the sense that *El Shaddai*, more so than many of today's games, reflects the ideas and ambitions of an auteur. We ask Sawaki if eschewing so many conventions gave him pause. "The first year was hard for me, as people did not agree with my direction," he says. "But as things started to fit in place it went smoothly. I think a game is really born after you play it. Only then you know if you have a game or not. That is certainly why, whatever I was told during the course of the development, I tried to keep my vision."

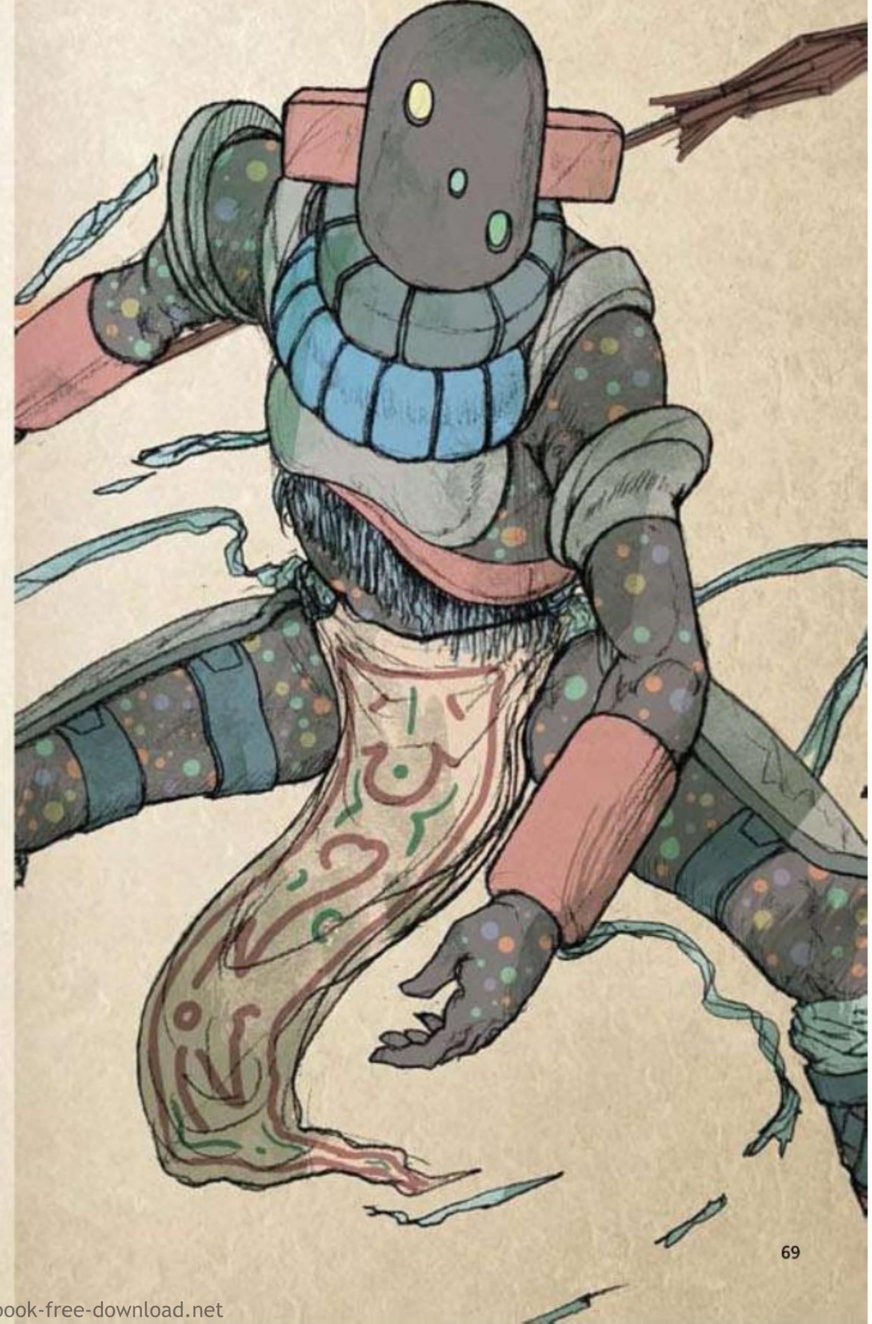
This stormy scene seems to employ all of *El Shaddai*'s visual tricks at once, flicking from white to black in an instant while the trees ripple with pearlescent colours



ANGELS AND DEMONS



Throughout our demo, which comprises roughly the first three hours of the game, we're thrown into a series of one-on-one duels against Enoch's angelic nemeses. They feel like enforced failures, so hopelessly outmatched is Enoch at this point. Ignition explains, however, that beating the angels early on is in fact possible, and will have repercussions later in the game. One particularly practised tester has survived the very first battle, apparently. The one 'proper' boss fight we play focuses more on positioning and timing than raw combat ability, requiring Enoch to dodge and dash between two oversized, metal-masked pigs, in the hope of coaxing them, matador-like, into charging at one another's faces.



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An audience with…

Danny Bilson

From B-movies to triple-A games, Danny Bilson has enjoyed one of the least conventional careers in the industry. But can a sci-fi writer really save THQ?

Hollywood is very familiar with the concept of the reboot. From '70s slasher flick remakes to the rediscovery of camp '80s TV cop shows, the movie business has made a fortune out of grabbing old formats and re-branding them for modern audiences. It is fitting, then, that the man behind the current re-invention of THQ is a film veteran. **Danny Bilson**, son of prolific TV director Bruce Bilson, spent the '80s and '90s grinding out sci-fi flicks, TV series and comics, working on cult movies like Trancers and Zone Troopers, as well as big-budget feature The Rocketeer. As executive VP of core games, he is now overseeing THQ's rebirth, abandoning the company's heritage in kids' games and licence tie-ins in favour of ambitious epics like *Homefront* and *Insane*.

It was a chance meeting on a plane with then-EA exec Don Mattrick that got Bilson, an avid gamer, into the interactive entertainment business. But what are the strengths that have allowed him to prosper here, and what can a Hollywood player really tell developers about making better games? We caught up with him at THQ's Gamers Week in New York to find out.

How did THQ look when you arrived?
Things were changing rapidly. I came in just as it hit. The way they'd done things in the past – kids' licensed properties – wasn't going to work any more. Within six months Jack Sorensen [the previous executive VP of worldwide studios] had left and they made me, a finance guy and a production guy senior VPs and co-heads of the studios. So now I had creative control.

And what did you do with it?
I wanted to create a system that was more like the one I grew up with in the film business in the '70s and '80s: it was about creativity first, not marketing. So I stopped all the consumer research – it was the first thing I threw out the door. I don't need to ask 15 teenagers in Encino what they want to play. I want to employ a team of gamers who *know* good from bad – it's that simple. What I found in this business is that a lot of the executives are not gamers, they don't play games, they're not in it for the love of the artform. So how are they going to know what's good? So I had an importance – a viability – as an executive; suddenly I'm a genius because I've been playing games for 30 years! I had a great knowledge of games as a consumer – that's it. It was an asset that these other executives didn't have. So how did I get to be executive vice president of a games company? I got that Atari 2600 in 1977 and never stopped playing. That's absolutely true.

> "I found that a lot of the executives are not in it for the love of the artform; suddenly I'm a genius because I've been playing games for 30 years!"

But has your movie background helped with the specifics of game development?
Hollywood has always had respect for creatives. For 14 years in a row I got a weekly pay cheque from the studios as a writer and producer and I never had to worry about profits or stock, I never even heard about it. All they did was nurture creativity because in Hollywood they know that the only way they're going to make money is to have great content. So now put me in charge, how am I going to rebuild this company? I'm going to build it around content. We're going to build a place that's friendly to creatives, that's artist, not marketer, first. And what next? Well, it's really easy to recruit great artists because no one else will offer them that kind of system. *Homefront* is an example – a couple of guys in New York came up with this incredible environmental storytelling. Our job is to give them the tools to be successful. And the marketers don't tell anyone what to make. They get inspired by what we're developing and do cool marketing as a result.

The interesting thing about *Homefront* is that there is a plausible series of events that lead to the game narrative: oil prices rise, mass recession, the global balance of power shifts away from America.
But it's not really about America. It's set in America but it's modelling the history of occupied nations. That's what this is. All the stuff you see in there is stuff we've got from other countries, we're just juxtaposing it with the US because it's the most filmed, the most known, environment in the world – turned upside down. There's no flag-waving, it's civilians fighting for their homes, and every beat you see in there is stuff that has happened, or could have happened, in Europe in the '40s, in Asia in the '60s, in the Middle East more recently. Occupation is horrible, war is horrible. We've had people playing it saying: 'Wow, I've never seen that kind of stuff in a game before.' I think violence with consequences is responsible entertainment – without consequences, it's exploitation. I mean, all we're doing is putting pixels on pixels, and trying to make people care about that. What I think we've achieved in *Homefront* is – the first time you pick up the gun in that game, you have more emotion around pulling that trigger than you've had in any other game.

But there's some sort of wider relevance?
Absolutely. One of the European journalists said that all our games are America-centric. I said: 'God damn it, which is the least American? *Call Of Duty*, *Medal Of Honor* or *Homefront*? I know you're going to say *Homefront* once you've played it.' We are a global company. I like to think I have some sort of global consciousness. My team has Americans, Australians, British – the talent I've boasted about recruiting has been Japanese, French-Canadian and Mexican!

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Danny Bilson co-wrote the script for PS2-era Bond game *Everything Or Nothing*, along with recent editions of comic book The Flash. Once VP of IP development at EA, he became executive VP of core games at THQ in 2008

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How much autonomy do you afford your developers?
I think that, being a creative myself, it's important to always support them, but not leave them alone. The one thing about game development, even more than film, is that it's really easy to get lost in the weeds. When I was working on Harry Potter, we were really trying to get the spell-casting mechanic working. And afterwards, I ran back to Bing [Gordon, former EA chief creative officer] in San Francisco and said: 'Look, Harry can cast a spell with the wand – look how it's affecting the environment!' And he said: 'Yeah, but the character looks like crap.' And he was right. In game development you can be so obsessed with fixing one element – it's the whole forest-and-trees scenario. You really need someone you trust to say: 'Hey, what about this'; someone who represents the audience. At THQ I don't think you'll find any studio that feels oppressed creatively. As Frank [Gibeau, president of EA Games] and I agree, we're the great suggesters – we don't tell anyone to do anything; I've done it maybe twice in three years, where I've said, 'that is not a suggestion, that is a direction'.

Can you tell us about those situations?
No! One is a feature in a game that we haven't announced. But someone has to make the call. I'm a great believer in a director – a visionary within a studio – someone has got to make the choices or you never get anything done. And then back in corporate, someone's got to say yes or no to that guy.

So nothing gets into the games without your approval?
I say to the studios: 'The good news is, you have a creative guy running the show, and the bad news is you have a creative guy running the show.' I'm a writer so I'm going to be all over your scripts, that's just the way it is. Someone gets to be the boss. I propose that we have the best creative system in the industry and the most supportive, but they're not city states and I do get involved in their creativity. However, I don't think you'll find anybody who'll complain about it because of the support and freedom they get within that system. The trick is, put the right guys in the studio whose work you love – hence [former Ubisoft Montreal creative director] Patrice Désilets who's going to build a team for us in Montreal next summer. I don't know what he's going to make, but I know I love his work. I'll give a little nudge here and there, but within certain parameters, he's going to do what he wants because I trust him. It's all about creative trust.

Let's talk about games retail – THQ has been quite vocal about the pre-owned games market.
You know, one low-level guy says something inappropriate at an interview and suddenly our company is vocal on pre-owned games! If you just look at the data on our Online Pass programme versus EA or anyone else, we're not any more aggressive! Look, I have really strong opinions on this. *I would buy a used game*! It's simple! You go into a store and you see one copy that says $60 and one that says $40, you're going to buy the one that says $40, right? So a gamer is a gamer – he might buy a new game one day and a used game another – I don't have anything against him. It's a simple problem for us – if we don't get a single penny from that purchase, I can't make *Homefront 2*. I can't! It's very expensive to make great games and if that money is being siphoned off somewhere else, we can't make this stuff. So we've got a tough problem here.

So what do you do?
We look at it differently for every game. We look at the content, the audience and we think, how can we help ourselves and the consumer with that game? So with *Homefront*, for example, everyone who buys a used copy of that game will be able to play every online map up to level five – like a big demo. If they want to continue up to level 50, they have to buy an Online Pass so that we can get a small piece of their purchase to help us make a sequel. I can make up all sorts of stuff about how much it costs us to host these online services, but the truth is, we need to make as much money as we can from our games so we can make more! It's not about greed – they won't let me make games if they don't make a profit. This is a capitalist market – we're not funded by the government! It's a tough deal. We're trying different things. With the WWE games we have an offer where you can get all the DLC for one discount price. And it's about retention, too. If you buy the game new, we want you to keep it because it's good and it has value – and there will be free DLC, there will be paid-for DLC: don't throw it back into that used channel! But am I angry with gamers? I can't be! Those guys who go to swap meets are just trying to make a buck. But they don't have to fund games.

How about downloadable games? EA has been supporting small studios with





THQ-published and Kaos Studios-developed shooter *Homefront* sees an invading army take over the United States. Does it deeply engage players' emotions? See our review on p84

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releases like *Shank* and *Deathspank*, and you have Double Fine doing *Stacking*. Are you interested in indie gaming?
Absolutely. And I want to make money there so we can do more of it! But is it all altruism on EA's part? I don't know – I think what's really going on is, the sooner we get to digital the fewer used games there are. I am passionately interested in digital.

Is that from a creative as well as a business standpoint?
Yeah. Being able to build more and have consumers chose what they want, as with *MX*, is really interesting. Being able to take more creative risks, with say, *Costume Quest* or *Stacking*? That's great. Not many companies would spend 40 million on those games, but spending a couple of mil… it gets to be really appealing. I want to make more games with Tim [Schafer], I just need some of this stuff to sell so I can get some more money in the bank!

What games have interested you in a narrative sense?
If you're asking me which games have interested me because of their story, I can't think of one. That's a place we have not cracked yet, as an industry. We should be able to tell great stories, fresh original stories, in this industry, just like in books, movies or anything else. I teach game writing at USC [University of Southern California] and what I tell the students is: 'It's up to you guys to really think of this as a storytelling medium.' There have been fantastic story moments in games, there are stories that I think are better than others. But if I try to think of a game in which the story has blown my mind. I don't think I've had that experience. Games aren't about story first. They're about interactive experience – the story is there to make you care about the mechanics, to make it more emotional. There have been some cool examples. *Ico*, I think, is art. But if I separate the story from the experience it doesn't blow my mind like, say, one of Stephen Hunter's thriller novels. But it's not impossible.

Is part of the problem this continuing reliance on cinematic sequences to provide plot points?
What I tell my students is, we'll still do that, but doing a cinematic is the failure state, that is the last resort of game storytelling. Someone at EA once said to me: 'I want to watch a movie while I'm playing a game about as much as I want to play a game while I'm watching a movie'. It's really not what the artform is about. As soon as you put a controller in someone's hand they want to interact. Not only that, but the movie industry makes a much better job of movie-making than we do in games. There have been fantastic examples – I thought that *Black Ops* was one of the best interactive movies I've played. I wouldn't say it was the best shooter I've played, but it was the best fiction of any of their games so far. But was it an awesome story? No! It was all borrowed from Manchurian Candidate – and the twist at the end really pissed me off. I mean, don't make me the bad guy if that's not my choice! That's one of my issues in game writing.

Choice is really important. My favourite game of the year was *Red Dead Redemption*, but if I have one criticism it's during the Mexico sequence: I didn't want to burn the rebel village down. I know what they were trying to do, you're playing an ambivalent character who's on a mission, who has flipped from supporting the rebels to the Federales and back, but it wasn't my choice. They could argue – and it's a pretty good argument – that it forced you to inhabit John Marston and his ambivalence, and that's a good point. OK, so now we're talking about taste and game design. But, at the end of *Black Ops*, don't make me shoot JFK! I don't want to shoot JFK! I got through this whole thing, all this CIA stuff, all of it, I don't want to have been the sleeper agent controlled by the bad guys!

Did you play *Heavy Rain*, which sprang a similar surprise on players?
I stopped playing. I couldn't get past 'brush your teeth, make breakfast.' I just thought, I'm not digging this, I don't want to brush my teeth in a game. I probably should play it, I probably have some sort of responsibility to play it. But I'm still a gamer and if I'm not getting it, I'm not going to drive hard through it. I drove straight through *Mass Effect 1* and *2* back to back. The first one I started, and I thought, god damn it, they have the best story-delivery system. But for me, I loved *Knights Of The Old Republic*, and they have not told a good story since then. Those *Mass Effect* games are just every single sci-fi movie cliché mashed together. I enjoy the progression through the games, and I had ownership over a couple of characters I liked, but there's nothing in there I remember. Honestly, I can barely recall the story. I've seen every beat of those games in sci-fi movies hundreds of times before. But don't get me wrong, I'm a big BioWare fan – I will play every game they release.

What do you think of *Saint's Row*, then? That's a series mired in film references.
Before I started work for THQ I had a couple of months to get my shit together, so they sent me the scripts for *Saint's Row 2* and *Red Faction Guerrilla*. When I read *Saint's Row*, I thought, well, I could suggest this or that, but they're so late in development, and I liked it. It was cool. When I hit *Red Faction Guerrilla*, I said this is a mess, and I did get involved, just trying to piece it together without violating the last year of production by reinventing it.

But with *Saint's Row* 3 you've presumably been involved from the start?
I'm not allowed to talk about it.

But there are no doubt things you felt you could add to the series, from a screenwriting perspective.
[Long pause.] Yes. [Laughs.]

Did you think about bringing onboard any Hollywood talent, as with *Homefront*?
Paul [DeMeo, Bilson's writing partner] and I did the work. With Steve Jaros. But mostly it's the studio's vision – we didn't impose on it. God damn it, there's such a precious marketing campaign for this, I can't talk about it. But I will say this: it's not ethnic anymore. It's nothing to do with the rap-star black gang thing. It's much more… it's multi-ethnic.

OK, let's talk about the future of THQ, you don't have a portfolio approach to planning do you? You never look at your lineup and think: 'Oh we don't have a football game.'
No, that would be bullshit.

> "You have to concentrate on the product – that's what people are buying. They're not buying your bullshit spreadsheets or financial targets"

So what do you plan for?
Originality, innovation, the game that stands out as different. Then delivering on that concept with excellence in game design and gameplay.

So that's very much a creative rather than business plan. You're not looking to make $200m for your shareholders; you're still thinking like a movie writer.
Well, that's who I am! [Laughs.] The business plan comes, but it won't come without what I said. That's where they get it all wrong! You have to concentrate on the product – that's what people are buying. They're not buying your bullshit spreadsheets or financial targets – they couldn't care less! What they care about is when they see a magazine article, or something online, or a cool screenshot and say: 'That's awesome!' Then they start thinking about it, imagining it, dreaming about what they want – just like with a movie. And when it comes out, amid all these other choices, they'll buy that game. And if enough people do that, those spreadsheet fuckers are going to be happy! But you can't get a good game out of a spreadsheet, right? Those guys can't make games! They can't even play them. It's crazy!

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KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK



SOUND ADVICE

Have you ever stopped to appreciate the extent to which sound design influences the way you play? We talked to some of the industry's leading audio directors to find out the tricks they use to pull our strings

Once heard, it's difficult to forget. Still reeling from a night-time car accident and disorientated by an encounter with knife-wielding children in an unfamiliar – and intensely foggy – town, the radio begins to crackle. That static, you subsequently learn, heralds the approach of *Silent Hill*'s nightmarish enemies. But while it's just one part of the game's rich audio tapestry, it's no less iconic than a puppet nurse or Pyramid Head. More than that, it's an indispensable tool throughout Konami's series, its functionality lifting it above the industrial cacophony. That foreboding crackle is nothing less than a key part of the play experience.

Sound design has a come a long way since PlayStation's reign. The advent of digital surround sound, increased memory and soaring budgets have seen developers producing games that provide rich and reactive high-fidelity soundscapes. While "sound attachers" – audio technicians who simply attach sounds to other people's objects – certainly exist, it's clear that the widening palette available to sound designers is yielding new opportunities for dedicated pioneers to explore audio's relationship to gameplay.

Just as visual artists have found new ways to represent information on screen (think of *Dead Space*'s seamlessly integrated HUD or the fashionable replacement of health bars with a wounded or limping character model), audio designers are playing an increasingly vital role in communicating useful information to the player.

Splash Damage audio director, **Chris Sweetman**, who's currently working on upcoming team shooter *Brink* (see p34), is a passionate believer in audio's ability to enhance gameplay. "Some games look at doing different bullet-bys for different types of character," he explains. "For instance, if you're playing a multiplayer game and there's a sniper, when a sniper bullet comes past you it sounds different to another guy shooting at you. That's effectively the audio driving the gameplay, because a lot of the time the visual effect won't necessarily be any different – but you'll know a sniper fired that bullet."

Sweetman also points out the importance of less obvious sound cues on the battlefield, such as the ability to discern what type of enemy is about to round a corner simply by listening to the sound of their footsteps, the clink of their weaponry and even the

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Graves' *Dead Space 2* session with the Skywalker Symphony Orchestra: "The end result is this mutated, unrecognisable sound. It sounds natural, but scary"



distinctive rustle of their clothing. In a frenetic deathmatch, where decisions must be made in milliseconds, any such tell becomes significant. Of course, sound designers frequently need to elicit very different reactions. Instead of flushing you out of a dangerous situation, there may be an environmental detail the developer wants you to appreciate. With *Dead Space* and *Dead Space 2*, Visceral Games' audio director **Andrew Boyd** accomplished this in a manner that enhances their atmospheres.

"At one point [in *Dead Space 2*], you're in an apartment building that's recently been run through by the necromorphs," explains Boyd. "As you walk down the hall, you hear a bunch of sounds coming out of the apartments; some of the doors are locked, some aren't, but there's this ghostly little voice just at the edge of hearing if you're walking in the hallway. If you follow it through the door and around the corner, you find this burned-out corpse sitting collapsed on a couch watching a broken loop of his wedding video, on which a Unitologist priest intones the prayer of the ceremony. That kind of creepy thing sets you up – that's the *Dead Space* way of doing things."

Although the tension created by such an encounter enhances a player's emotional experience, these events aren't just for show. There's no real need to explore that part of the Sprawl, but travelling off the beaten path at the behest of the eerie siren call results in a reward – perhaps a power node that might otherwise have been missed. However, Boyd's

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Top: Stefan Strandberg
Above: Jason Graves



Battlefield's soundscapes got a boost when Strandberg acquired "a hard drive from the sound recordist that worked with Ross Kemp in Afganistan"

invisible breadcrumb trails are not only relevant to claustrophobic horror games.

"I really like the way that audio was implemented in *Uncharted 2* to help and guide you," says **Jason Graves**, who composed the soundtracks for both *Dead Space* games. "I can easily get turned around if I'm in a room or a cave, and it's always nice when a little new sound-design thing comes in or the music fades in when I reach a new point – I know I'm heading in the right direction! I'm sure they didn't do that for people like me, fumbling around the game, but it works on many levels, which is why I think it's so effective."

If a player is to associate a sound with a particular meaning, it must be easily recognisable – but there's a delicate balance to strike. Platinum Games made it seem easy in *Bayonetta*: the game's subtle, chiming audio cue prior to an enemy's strike cuts through the chaos onscreen and clearly identifies the moment to dodge attacks. Its consistency ensures that no matter how busy the screen gets, you always feel in control – it actively encourages you to wade in.

While avoiding enemies at the last minute or distinguishing an enemy by the sound of their weapon is all very well, if handled badly any lack of variation quickly becomes apparent – just like a section of repeating rock texture you can't help but notice. DICE audio director **Stefan Strandberg** is keenly aware of the problem.

"These two things are tearing us apart: we're working in one direction to counteract repetition, and then in another to create iconic sounds," he explains. "For example, with *Bad Company*, you can tell a sniper is aiming at you because we kept one iconic sound there to be the cue – although it's subtle, and still very much part of the soundscape, it has to be part of the same world. We always ask if a sound is part of the same world, the same palette.

"It's like being the Beatles: you get four chords, but you can make amazing songs with them! It's important to keep some parts iconic, while also keeping a palette that's true to the overall picture – then try to lead the player there within that soundscape. Creative boundaries are very good for sound designers to have, because we can do anything."

"In *MotorStorm: Arctic Edge*, you're racing over this Arctic tundra in all manner of vehicles, and you'll very often be flat out," recounts **Jerry Ibbottson**, founder of Media Mill – an audio production company that specialises in producing sound for video games and animation. "Because of this, once you get to fifth gear, after a few seconds [the engine sound] will change up to sixth, then seventh, and in theory it could keep changing up a gear at random times indefinitely. Players aren't sitting there counting up and thinking, 'Hang on, now he's in tenth!' There isn't even a gear indicator onscreen – [the sound is] literally to give you the sense that the vehicle's constantly accelerating. Something that might appear to be telling you what's going on isn't necessarily doing so; it might be telling you what the sound designers and game designers want you to think is going on, ultimately to make it a lot more fun."

Of course, repetition can also be avoided by contrasting loud moments with quiet ones – a technique that the *Dead Space* games use to fantastic, startling effect when the action takes place in the vacuum of space. Having built up an awareness of the necromorphs' skittering cues, moving into an area in which they can silently approach you is a terrifying change of pace, and forces players to adapt to a more cautious style of play.

However, it's not only sound effects – or their absence – that can be used to influence player behaviour: "[Rockstar's] use of music was absolutely fascinating," says Sweetman, recalling the moment you first cross the Mexican border in *Red Dead Redemption*. "When that José González song kicks in, it's just amazing. There are probably only one or two developers in the world who are brave enough to do that. In the case of *Red Dead*, they effectively turned off the gameplay for that five or ten minutes. You didn't come into contact with any bad guys, it was just like, 'This is where you have to get to: off you go.'"

"I think the biggest way music really affects and influences the player is when it comes down to the interactive element," adds Graves. "With *Dead Space*, we have what are called 'fear markers,' which are like dropping a pin in Google Maps – we can drop a fear marker on anything in the game that we want to, whether



The two *Dead Space* games are lauded for their terrifying audio. The line between music and sound effects is consistently blurred throughout both

"SOMETHING THAT MIGHT APPEAR TO BE TELLING YOU WHAT'S GOING ON ISN'T NECESSARILY DOING SO; IT MIGHT BE WHAT THE SOUND DESIGNERS AND GAME DESIGNERS WANT YOU TO THINK IS GOING ON"



VOICE BREAKING

One of the biggest challenges facing today's sound designers is predicting how users will experience their work. With so many potential set-ups, game audio is as fragmented as PC hardware, and has to work on headphones, in stereo and in surround, as well as in a catalogue of different acoustic spaces. This is before you consider the fact that not everyone will have set their system up correctly, either.

"*Dead Space* is certainly a franchise that works better in surround than it does in stereo," says Boyd. "If you've got three slashers attacking you and a leaper appears right behind you, you're going to really wish you had surround 'cause you're going to hear his voice and think, 'I don't know where this guy is!'"

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HEARING IS BELIEVING

If so much can be achieved using audio in games, what would one built from sound alone be like? Cross-platform production company Somethin' Else's iPhone adventure, *Papa Sangre*, sets out to answer that question, and its curious mix of binaural audio, survival horror and traditional adventuring creates an experience quite unlike anything else. We sat down with company director of digital, **Paul Bennun**, to find out more.

How did the idea for *Papa Sangre* form?
I'd worked on loads of games over the past 15 years, and I'd always wanted to do a game that was primarily based in sound. The fundamental driver there was the phrase "pictures are better on radio". If you stop being obsessed by polygon counts and physics engines, you can do something far more subtle with just as much detail and complexity as the most beautifully realised 3D environments.

Why did you choose to create the game for iOS, rather than any other format?
Firstly, we wanted to have a physical interface that was going to be as transparent as the audio interface, and a handset with a very simple control surface quickly vanishes – like a good game controller. Also, we're doing true binaural processing of sound on the fly. Instead of having sound coming from five sources, we can simulate sound coming from 1,100 different sources. It's frighteningly intense, but to do that you have to have headphones. We'd love to have it on Android as well, but Android's media handling is quite primitive compared to iOS.

Its price is quite high for an unproven concept.
I think it's really good value if you consider that we had to create an entirely new set of primary technologies to deliver it; effectively, we had to build our own Unreal engine. In some ways, it needed to be as technically advanced as *Infinity Blade* – it pushes the processor just as far.

Has Somethin' Else's experience in other media allowed you to approach game design differently?
Without any doubt. But good game design is good game design – it doesn't matter who's doing it. We've got experience of working on games such as *Driver* – we did all the scripts for the new Ubisoft game – and also games going right back to *Buzz* in the late '90s, but also theatre, radio and drama, too. We've got a different creative palette to many game developers, who look to TV and film and the way things are normally done for the aesthetic environments in which they set their games.

Did you consider gamers with partial or no sight when designing *Papa Sangre*?
Absolutely. We created ten fundamental principles in our design document, and having a game that blind people could play was one of them. But we didn't want it to be seen as a game *for* blind people – it's a game for everybody; blind people are just a subset of that. If you're a voiceover user, you'll find there's an entirely separate interface to the game. We've done a huge amount of work on making the interface something that people who use VO are going to find useable.

What can other developers learn from your approach?
One interesting thing about the game is that the tonal variation within it is very different to any other I've played. I wish there were more games that were attempting to explore different emotional registers, really. I very much admire games such as *BioShock* and *Portal* – and also *Dead Space*. *Dead Space* in particular has managed to explore how suspense and horror work in a really interesting way.

I really wish to God that more developers would pay more attention to voice acting and scripting, because it's still really shit in a lot of games. It adds *so* much, but you get these massively expensive games, where people are prepared to hire the Prague City Orchestra, but still think it's acceptable to just knock up the dialogue. But it's just not; it adds so much more to the intelligence and lasting value of the game.

"IF YOU STOP BEING OBSESSED BY POLYGON COUNTS AND PHYSICS ENGINES, YOU CAN DO SOMETHING SUBTLE WITH JUST AS MUCH DETAIL AS THE MOST BEAUTIFULLY REALISED 3D ENVIRONMENTS"



Photograph by: **Matt Locke**



Papa Sangre displays only a pair of footprints and compass-like wheel onscreen, players walking or running by tapping the feet alternatively



In a multiplayer shooter like *Brink*, Sweetman stresses, telling guns apart by sound is important, but any benefits can be quickly lost in the cacophony

it's a creature that's moving, a door that's not moving, a spaceship that's coming closer to you. Your proximity to these fear markers is what determines how the music is playing.

"A great example is just walking up to a doorway – half of the time, you open the door and there's something there that attacks you, and the other half of the time there's nothing there. But a lot of players will start walking towards it, the music builds up and they'll go the other way, because they don't want to have whatever the music's telling them is coming up – it's too scary! It's just another little interactive psychological thing that we use to poke 'em."

Visceral's fear-marker system demonstrates how closely entwined the audio department is with every other aspect of the game, its use necessitating constant communication with other teams. It also points to a wider trend in which savvy studios are empowering composers and sound designers in areas of development that might be considered outside of their traditional remit. DICE is one such developer, having entrusted Strandberg and his team with control over camera shake and pad rumble.

"Before we had control of the camera, we had guys at DICE saying that the cannon on the tank wasn't loud enough," explains Strandberg. "Then we added camera shake on the recoil, and people went, 'It's too loud!' At that point, we could actually lower the sound back to its initial level, because when those things are in sync, when you get a rumble in the pad, a camera shake and you get the bang, you go, '*Fuck*, that's loud!' But actually, it wasn't that loud – it's just working with more of your senses.

"It's like when you're inside of a building that's going to collapse, the whole building is moaning and creaking before it happens, so you get this subtle cue that you'd better leave. But when we just had the sound there, the cue wasn't clear enough.

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BATTLE ARENA HUSH & DIN

Sweetman on *Brink*'s 'Interactive Battle Ambiance': "In a lot of games, if a character fires a weapon and he's X distance away from you, all that will happen is that the volume will be slightly lower. The idea behind IBA is that we have different stages of distance that crossfade depending on how far away the enemy is.

"Effectively, you're hearing the sound of the battle around you as it's going on, but in a completely dynamic way. So if there's nothing going on, the ambience will come up in volume, but as soon as a battle kicks off, you'll be able to hear exactly where it's taking place and how far away it is from you."



Jerry Ibbottson, founder of audio company Media Mill

With sound, rumble and shake playing together, though, it's awesome. We actually work very closely with the effects artists and tweak cameras together with them."

Not every production is as acutely aware of the importance of audio to the final product, and everyone we speak to agrees that even the majority of those that do often fail to involve audio experts in the project early enough.

"In the case of Splash Damage," says Sweetman, "I'm in from the very beginning on everything from concept work, game design and all of that kind of stuff. It helps to have someone from audio involved at that early stage because you can plan ahead and get all these cool ideas about stuff. That's what more developers need to be doing – it's not the sound people you need to persuade, it's effectively your development directors, producers, and so on."

While audio teams used to toil away in the shadow of artists and programmers, it's clear that more and more developers are realising that great sound can not only enhance their games, but also drive distinct play experiences. With today's technological advances, sound designers no longer face the crippling restrictions they once did, instead wrestling with the – arguably preferable – problem of finding the time and manpower to create the assets needed for a big-budget title.

"It's very, very frustrating as an audio director, day to day," muses Boyd, "as I always wish I had more guys working on something. But if I take a step back and look back at the past 18 years that I've been doing this stuff, it's never been like this before. We're in a golden age."



For their work on racing games, the staff at Media Mill spend a great deal of time revving up real vehicles on the company's farm-based premises near York. Pity the neighbours



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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Dead Space 2



Even though Visceral denied Isaac Clarke the holiday he earned in *Dead Space*, we're hooked on the second game's white-knuckle ride. It proves that more can be… more
360, PS3, EA

Magicka



We've scored runes into ethernet cables. We've chanted in ancient tongues. Will only the blood of **Edge**'s mewling firstborn purge *Magicka*'s netcode of evil?
PC, PARADOX INTERACTIVE

DropZap



Inspired by *Drop7*, Amir Michail's puzzler adds a fresh mechanic that's easier to experience than explain. All you need to know is that – deep breath – it's even better
IPHONE, AMIR MICHAIL

In the beginning

The ugly side of character creation



RPGs ask you to make the most important choice in the game at the one point you are most ill-equipped to do so – the start. How do you know then which playstyle you'll enjoy most, or which will prove most useful?

Mage, warrior or rogue? Male or female? How do you feel about the size of your nostrils? Have you considered cultivating a moustache? The question of who you are is crucial in the RPG. It defines players' sense of ownership over their characters; it establishes the gameworld as one which reacts to their desires and actions. It's also a huge risk – if the game doesn't adequately account for the options present, if it doesn't guarantee satisfaction with all possible permutations, a player's experience can be gruelling. Witness 2004's spectacularly buggy *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*, whose latter stages are nigh impossible for those who chose not to sink their fangs into gun skills.

Role-playing videogames, being more prescriptive than their pen-and-paper forebears, have struggled with how they account for player choice. While a flesh and blood GM would just tweak the script, giving players freedom to define their digital selves is often the same as giving them rope to hang themselves. Many games have solved the problem in the manner of *Dragon Age 2* (see p82) – by supplying a choice of just three familiar fantasy archetypes. The restriction, you hope, means the developers have attentively authored each path. In the case of *DA2*, that's certainly the case.

Be too strict with the available options, however, and you risk denying a sense of empowerment. Be too free – a particular risk for the likes of *Fallout* – and you risk a formless experience that forces users to grow up too fast. As such, *New Vegas* bewilders: you've just woken up? Good. Now select your attributes, pick your skill and, before you go, you'd best settle on a couple of traits as well. There are no generic, prescribed types, and no clear way to see through the illusion to the character routes beneath. You better hope your luck's in, Courier.

Bethesda's preceding *Fallout 3* made this task more accessible by writing the character creation metaphor large in the form of an actual childbirth. It's an approach that asks players to think of the choices not in mechanical terms but in which attributes they admire – the kind of personality they might cultivate in their own child. And as with child-rearing, if you get it wrong, you only have yourself to blame.









Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten

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DRAGON AGE II

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), MAC, PC, PS3
DEVELOPER BIOWARE **PUBLISHER** EA
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PREVIOUSLY IN** E222







Players land on the Kirkwall map screen (top) after leaving each area. Whenever the game's story jumps forward in time, BioWare treats players to a lavishly illustrated storybook cutscene (middle). You won't fight the above dragon, but it's important to the plot nonetheless

Fantasy is one of the few literary genres in which you expect to be greeted by a detailed map when you crack open a new book. These fixtures serve a variety of purposes, both functional and atmospheric. They tout the breadth of the world erected to house its characters' exploits (hawking the author's wheres, as it were) and reinforce the fiction by lending a veneer of historical authenticity. The map's artist inevitably sprinkles the page with runic script meant to tickle readers' imagination. And, perhaps most importantly, they enable readers to plot the movements of the book's characters as they trek across vast continents and varying terrain.

> Starting a new fantasy RPG only to spend most of your time in a beige, boxy castle town is like getting socks for Christmas

Dragon Age II has its own map, of course, which is split into three different screens – a daytime view of the city of Kirkwall, a nighttime equivalent, and a sliver of the Free Marches just outside the city. This claustrophobic setting is the game's most glaring weakness: you can't have an epic adventure in a single city any more than a child will be content to endlessly explore his own back garden.

Dragon Age II opens with hero Hawke (a female warrior, in our playthrough) and a small contingent of family and other refugees fleeing their home village of Lothering, which has been sacked and burned by marauding Darkspawn. This fairly straightforward tutorial stage funnels you down a narrow mountain path and prompts you to practice using your special abilities to dispatch the Hurlocks – shambling, hissing Skeletor lookalikes – that queue up to fling themselves on to Hawke's blade edge. The scenic backdrop to these early encounters, your first vision of the gameworld, is an expanse of featureless brown. Not exactly a dramatic first impression.

The lack of visual imagination persists throughout the experience, an unforgivable fault for a fantasy title with such a broad canvas on which to paint. It's hard to imagine what *DAII*'s concept artwork might've looked like, as there's none of the architectural or natural grandeur that oozes from games such as *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*. It's a problem compounded by the amount of time you'll spend in Kirkwall. Starting a new fantasy RPG only to spend most of your time in a beige, boxy castle town is like getting socks for Christmas. *DAII*'s codex is intricately detailed and nicely written, and it's a shame to see the world-building of a talented team of writers sabotaged by tired art direction.

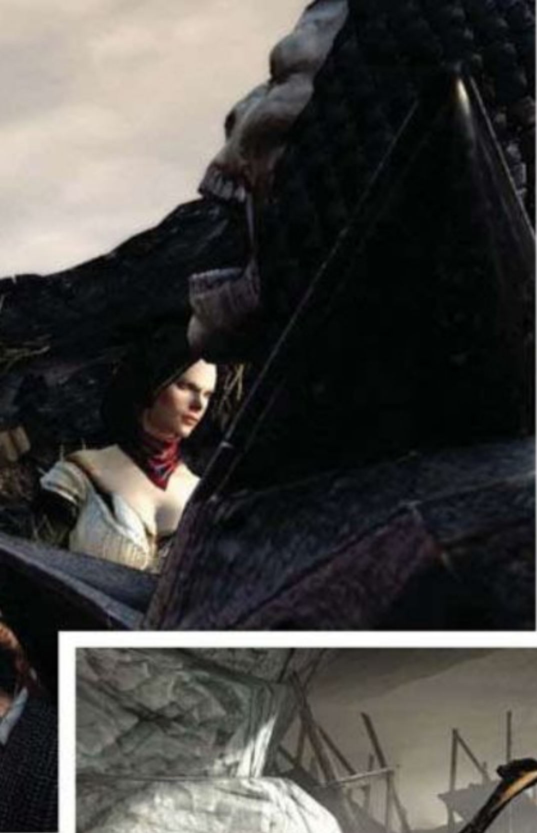
Visual problems extend to a character level, too. Your party's escape from Lothering is followed by a tragedy that, jarringly, seems to elicit no emotion from Hawke whatsoever, as the waxen, seemingly Botox-numbed facial expression gracing her character model keeps her from ever feeling emotionally three-dimensional. Then the game sends you across the sea to Kirkwall, a sprawling city that historically served as a port for slaves





In a welcome change, protagonist Hawke (the striking redhead, left) now has a voice. This approach lets you choose prompts from the dialogue wheel which are assigned an icon to show whether you're nice or naughty

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Ogres make a return, and their double-fist ground-pound attack is still devastating. You'll find this one lumbering about the Dalish settlement out in the Free Marches



The vast majority of combat in the game involves skirmishes with enemies your size, but you'll encounter a handful of towering baddies like Varterral (above)

destined to spend the rest of their pitiful lives toiling away at dull jobs with no hope of ever escaping – a painfully ironic backstory.

In order to earn enough money to join an expedition to the Deep Roads – the *Dragon Age* franchise's shoulder-shrug in the direction of Tolkien's Moria – you'll bounce around the various corners of Kirkwall performing the usual litany of fantasy quests. You'll save lost children. You'll recover goods that residents have inexplicably misplaced in nearby caves. You'll assist the city guard in slapping down mercenary aggressors stirring up trouble along the Wounded Coast. You'll help the owner of a mine exterminate his pesky dragon infestation so his employees can return to safe working conditions.

The tasks are drowsily familiar, yet mostly competent in their framing and execution. BioWare's shrewd revamping of the first *Dragon Age*'s clunky dialogue system – conversations now feature the *Mass Effect* franchise's dialogue wheel – makes your choices feel both more seamless and resolute. Icons embedded in the wheel signify whether a given response is noble, comedic, evil, conciliatory or flirtatious. Not having to scan labyrinthine dialogue prompts will save you hours, though it's hard to feel suave in your attempts to seduce a party member when you're selecting prompts such as "You're so romantic," or "I can't let you go," next to a faintly shimmery heart icon. The script itself is wildly uneven, with moments of wit offset by cringeworthy lines.

While no PC enthusiast would be caught dead uttering a gracious word about the RPG combat experience on a console, *DAII*'s combat in its console version feels tight and responsive. Instead of selecting an enemy and watching your character lazily flail her sword at measured intervals, there's a more taut hack-and-slash immediacy to the game. Each button press – whether you're using a simple primary attack or an ancillary special move you've acquired through level upgrades – feels consequential. You can also pivot between party members with the press of a shoulder button, and assign them tactics in the same manner as *FFXII*'s gambit system, the system's subtleties comprising a welcome improvement on the original's.

After nearly two dozen hours spent completing quests in Kirkwall's various precincts, we were anxious for the Deep Roads expedition, which would surely serve as a bridge to a fresh new city or locale. Imagine our horror, then, when an all-too brief Deep Roads interlude spat us unceremoniously back out into Kirkwall to spend the remaining 25 hours settling a dispute between the ruling heads of the city's templars and mages, leaving our wanderlust to smoulder unfulfilled. Instead of the road going ever on, over rock and under tree, our path reached an early dead-end in Kirkwall, where we remained like a child in an embattled marriage trying to convince our bickering parents to play nicely. **[6]**



Following key conversations, you'll see how your choices affected your party. Act in a templar or demon's interests and watch a mage's opinion of you plummet

Story time



Dragon Age II **frames its narrative as a tale being recounted by Hawke's dwarf companion Varric for the benefit of a perpetually second-guessing Chantry Seeker. This offers BioWare's writers a convenient way to flash-forward in time at key points in the story. The effect works marvellously for one particular dramatic moment, as Varric foreshadows the fact that tragedy is about to befall one of your party members. On the other hand, there's something detracting about the game's action playing out in what you've just been told is a glorified flashback sequence. It's easy to feel as though you're not really changing the future, just acting out the past.**

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HOMEFRONT

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), MARCH 18 (EU) PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: KAOS STUDIOS PREVIOUSLY IN: E218, E221







The firstperson view features neat judders and jars at especially explosive moments, but the big vehicle mission (above centre) is a disappointment, placing you in a helicopter gunship and asking you to escort a convoy of trucks

Vaudevillian, mimic and sometime action man, *Homefront* is the holiday-camp cabaret act of firstperson shooters. It's a funny, familiar, confused kind of game, whose debt to what has come before in the genre is profound, to say the least. Sold by THQ as a plucky outsider against the *COD*s, *Halo*s and *Battlefield*s of this world, *Homefront* offers almost nothing of its own. *COD*'s big moments and camera tricks, in particular those of the *Modern Warfare* series, are assiduously reproduced. When it comes to its competitors, *Homefront* clearly sees the rules of engagement to be a precursor to marriage.

The premise: following the death of Kim Jong-il, North Korea begins a period of colonial expansion under his heir Kim Jong-un. By the time the game rolls around, the, ahem, 'Norks' are in control of most of Asia and occupying America – and you're just an ex-pilot on a bus to the death camps. The North Korean soldiers, who you'll be fighting for most of the game, are hardly ambiguous enemies. On the bus ride that begins the game, you'll see a sliding scale of abuse: they begin by bullying folk around, then they're beating someone up; soon they're gunning down a young couple as a screaming child looks on. Is there anything to which these North Koreans won't stoop? Apparently not. Soon, atrocity piles on atrocity, and battle piles upon battle.

In substance, *Homefront* works exactly like many examples of the genre: a desperately brief and linear obstacle course with pop-up enemies and invisible trigger points which clear each section. (Sometimes, we witnessed straggling foes spontaneously explode when we hurried through to the next narrative beat. A case of invisible mines?)

There's a pretence of tactics in occasionally having to snipe a specific grenade-toting enemy (a setup that's repeated ad nauseam), but this is basic point-and-shoot combat. The Korean monsters move around but rarely flank without your permission, and are most obliging about repeatedly sticking their heads up in the same position. They aren't a varied foe, either, with the boss fights reserved for vehicle sections. These are cinematic affairs, both on-rails and off. Those in which you control Goliath, a six-wheeled, gun-mounted jeep, simply involve lining up a set of crosshairs. Indeed, while *Homefront* has frustrating sections that will need a few restarts, most of its climactic moments pass rather easily.

At least the gunplay satisfies: the weapons will all be familiar to *COD* veterans, but they're good copies. The sprint is rather floaty – and you have the ability to reload as you do it – while the cover mechanic is rarely required, despite constant demands from your buddies to use it. The straight-up shooting of *Homefront*, however, is solid.

It's let down by poorly implemented

> Homefront isn't slick enough. It exists in limbo: mechanically competent but uninspired, with a story that's dumb, but never big or fun with it





The enemies you're asked to target (left) helpfully have floating arrows over their heads, part of a HUD which tends towards being intrusive, plastering ammo counts and objectives over the screen

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There are several 'stealth' sequences which don't really deserve the name – you're bound to a hand-holding AI throughout. The Resistance are supposedly guerrilla fighters, but this is much more Rambo III than First Blood



This parking-lot shootout is one of the game's highlights – explosion after explosion ratcheting up until you're guiding missiles head-on toward the Korean forces. Most of the game's other action set-pieces don't have a tenth of the ambition

features that should come as standard. Grenades tend to confound your expectations of FPS physics – try to bounce them off something and they'll either stick or drop straight to the floor. Then there's the scenery, which throws up destructible elements but just as many inexplicably sturdy ones. It's not a coherent environment to fight in – or look at.

Graphics aren't always important, but in the case of a high-end FPS they're absolutely paramount – and *Homefront*'s aren't top-tier. Some locations are more polished than others: a friendly settlement near the beginning, and a parking-lot showdown, look like they could be from another game. Most of its course, however, is simply enemy-rich and texture-poor – a formless trudge through warehouses, weirdly shaped homes and interchangeable cover layouts. The in-game loading is awkwardly implemented, making the player wait between sections while NPCs slowly move into position and swap a few remarks. Then, 15 seconds later, the figurative padlock is removed to let you start playing.

Compared to the FPS games that dominate the charts, *Homefront* isn't close to being slick enough. Against the genre's narrative high bars – the *BioShock*s and *Half-Life*s – it fares even worse. *Homefront* exists in limbo: mechanically competent but uninspired, with a story that's dumb, but never big or fun with it.

We've touched on the Norks already – and suffice it to say that *Homefront*'s depiction of the North Koreans stops just short of a goose-stepping Kim Jong-un singing about being lonely. But its handling of the other side of the narrative, the Resistance, is even more uneven. At one point, the North Koreans blow up an American settlement, and while you're fighting them off, a mother clutches a child and screams: "Say-ayve my baybay!" At the beginning of the next section you wander through a peaceful all-American home, and sure enough, the mother's there thanking you while hugging her swaddled infant. Civilians caught in warzones should be affecting, but it's laid on so thickly here that it feels like crude agitprop.

Homefront is a competent enough copy of an over-familiar template. Its faults are many, but they're magnified by the obvious comparison: this isn't an alternative to *COD*, but a game in thrall to it. Its world is a crass one – the characters unconvincing, the emotional beats straight from My First War Movie, and its suggested dystopia a bore. If North Korea did decide to start World War III, we'd hope for a higher class of propaganda than this. **[5]**



Meet the team: Connor (at the door) is a trigger-happy nutter who just wants to kill North Koreans, while at one point hand-wringing liberal Rianna (right) kills a guard from behind before sighing: "It never gets any easier"



For a game that emphasises vehicle combat, particularly in multiplayer, *Homefront*'s doesn't feel especially powerful, the underpowered physics making the world feel weightless

Modernfield 2: Synergy



***Homefront*'s multiplayer is similar to *COD*'s, but brings a little of *Battlefield*'s vehicular combat in as well. The headline feature, previously seen in *Far Cry 2*'s multiplayer, is the accumulation of Battle Points for the usual actions – shooting an enemy, saving a friend, getting revenge, taking an objective, etc. These can be hoarded up then spent on-the-fly for boosts: UAVs, tanks, RPGs. In theory, it opens up the killstreak bonanzas to players who don't get ten-kill streaks as a matter of course, but in the games we played, the team which got ahead had the Battle Points to call in more hardware to keep it on top. Despite that, it provides a perfectly enjoyable – though hardly distinctive – experience. And a big black mark when compared to *Battlefield* is its lack of environmental deformation.**

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When People Can Fly came to implement the slide, there must have been discussion about how far you should be able to go. Clearly the conclusion was that realism is for the birds – and the player is ludicrously, thrillingly agile as a result. With a quick double-tap of A, Grayson can skid across nearly any of the game's arenas in seconds, sending enemies flying as he goes





Co-developer Epic's fingerprints are visible, with some weapons similar to those in *Gears Of War*, but wouldn't the Hammer of Dawn be a lot better if the beam came not from the sky but from the eyes of a robotic dinosaur?





BULLETSTORM

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA **DEVELOPER:** PEOPLE CAN FLY/EPIC GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E215, E224

If being an adult means learning to say sorry, then we may have to excuse ourselves and join People Can Fly in its Never Never Land of unapologetic carnage. Crass, ridiculous and violent, *Bulletstorm*'s tenet of Mayhem First suggests other games can keep their brooding story arcs and their giant wife-eating metal sarcophagi – what matter most are the mechanics of battle. That it looks so willfully stupid belies its consummate craft: you may think you want to boot a mutant up the arse because it's fun, but really you've just been ensnared by an elegant reward system that forces you to eke every bit of dynamism out of an armoury of improbable weapons. Clever is as stupid does.

Let's stick with the stupid for a moment: Grayson Hunt, a soldier turned space pirate, is on the tail of his old boss, General Serrano – a deliciously villainous Gary Busey sound-alike who could singlehandedly out-swear the entire cast of Deadwood. But Grayson's pursuit of vengeance comes at quite a cost, and he finds himself marooned on the surface of a distant planet – once a leisure resort – with several legions of cannibals, mutants and military lying between him and escape. The place itself is an indemnity lawyer's paradise: every walkway bridges deadly drops, flanked by rolls of razor wire and barbs of twisted steel. Giant whirring fan blades slurp at the air and exposed electric cabling fizzes and thrashes. This is to say nothing of the plantlife, which is variously toxic, parasitic or just plain carnivorous.

The player himself has nothing to fear from the majority of these health hazards, however. Grayson has better sense than to launch himself from ledges, and the absence of a jump button allows People Can Fly to keep the player safely corralled – a restriction that only occasionally annoys. Instead, the spines of cacti, gushing thermal vents and other perils exist only to have unfortunate foes booted into them. With a tap of B, Grayson can plant a foot right in the chest of an enemy, sending him twisting though the air in slow motion. A double-tap of A will send you into a long slide, barging mutants off their feet. There's the Leash, too – *Bulletstorm*'s nod to the gravity gun – which can be used to whisk enemies into the air and pull them towards you. Land your flailing opponent on something sharp and you're rewarded with a cheeky pun and a generous dollop of points – which are then used to outfit and upgrade your equipment (and in the alternative Echoes mode, compete for the high-score table).

This so-called 'Skillshot,' is the gleeful, brilliant, black heart of the game, rewarding players for experimental murder, challenging them to discover new combinations for its ludicrous arsenal and mine each combat arena for points. And so you juggle enemies in the air and slam them through every kind of scenery; you skewer a conga line of mutants to a wall with a single drill rocket or lodge a parasitic fruit onto a freak's head and punt him into a neon sign; you tag a hapless





You're almost never alone – AI characters help you throughout, largely while exchanging insults. On some of the later levels, we found they would occasionally block our shots or mess up Skillshots by kicking enemies the wrong way

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There's a secondary solo mode called Echoes in which you replay levels from the campaign as score- and time-attack. There is, alas, no campaign co-op. Multiplayer, meanwhile, is co-op vs AI only. It's slighter than the average shooter in that regard – but maybe People Can Fly has just trimmed the flab



Bulletstorm's smirking mask occasionally slips, and you see something awkward and earnest – characters forgive each other, forgive themselves, and learn lessons about the nature of revenge. It's tawdry stuff, but such is the game's readiness to mock itself that it's hard to resent



foe with a guided explosive sniper bullet, tossing him into the midst of his friends before detonating; you sever heads, torsoes and scrotums. If you're just shooting people, you're doing it wrong.

As delightful as the toybox is, there is the worry that much of its pleasure comes from novelty and, even across the span of the campaign, the novelty does eventually plateau. The sequence of enemies that each battle brings becomes familiar – and though it's kept spicy by your repertoire of Skillshots, the game feels like it's waiting for its blue Gravity Gun moment, waiting to be turned up one more notch. Despite its early promise of bloody hyperbole, *Bulletstorm* idles just a little in its last third – at least in the fundamentals of its gunplay if not its plot, which continues to spill the player from one dizzying scripted set-piece to the next with barely a breath in between.

Bulletstorm is about toying with a gaudy system of carnage and giggling at the chaos that emerges. Everything else, by rights, should be frippery – a cinematic sop to the cheap seats. Yet, to our increasing surprise, *Bulletstorm*'s hokum plot resolves into an agreeable romp, short on brain cells but peopled with a cast of likable, foul-mouthed miscreants. They may be crudely shaped cartoons, and the game periodically issues a heady guff of cheese – but its worst offences are brief, and pomposity is always punctured by humour. And *what* humour. Too many videogames look back to *Monkey Island*'s softball puns and wacky gags. *Bulletstorm* shares barely a strand of DNA with it, preferring a torrent of creative cursing so scatological and smutty that it would have In The Loop's Malcolm Tucker scrubbing himself clean in the shower.

There's schoolyard sniggering to be had at the script's liberal and intentionally nonsensical use of the word 'dick' as a ready substitute for, well, anything. But the profanity isn't always a stand-in for real wit. As the recovering alcoholic protagonist approaches a whisky vending machine, its chirpy recorded message intones: "Oh! Somebody's got a thirsty liver. Have another drink – blame it on your upbringing." And there's a well-honed feel for slapstick, too – not least in the ways in which you dispatch enemies, but also by design of the narrative: at one point a heavily foreshadowed boss fight ends prematurely when the monstrous



The Skillshot is the gleeful, brilliant, black heart of the game: rewarding players for experimental murder

creature bangs its head on a pipe and tumbles into a vat of acid. It doesn't always hit the mark: your po-faced cybernetic sidekick Ishi is sadly underwritten, and some of the bickering between characters is snarkier than it is smart, but even so, *Bulletstorm* prompts more guffaws than any self-described comic game we've played in recent years.

Wit and wonderfully toxic language lend character to its bones, but *Bulletstorm* pitches itself as an unreconstructed shooter; happy to be superficially silly, linear and – given how light it is on multiplayer and co-op modes – perhaps even throwaway. With such a focus, People Can Fly has made the best game possible: one which is smart enough to make a case for looking dumb. **[9]**



Bulletstorm has several boss battles, yet not once did we have the urge to wrench the disc out and bite it in two – which is what we've always thought to be the normal reaction. People Can Fly has made showdowns that feel both fair and fearsome – not to mention spectacular

Gang banging



In a shade of *Gears Of War*'s Horde mode, *Bulletstorm*'s multiplayer sees four players cooperate to take out waves of enemies. The clever twist is that it's not your survival at stake, but the score. Progression to the next wave requires you to Skillshot your way to the big numbers, making every spilled brainpan and skewered belly count. Periodically, you're challenged to match a specific freak with a form of execution, in exchange for a massive payload of points. It's a tough game to play with strangers, as interfering with a teammate's kill can spoil the score. Even when over-enthusiastic allies aren't jeopardising Skillshots, we found the game didn't always register the kills correctly – both acknowledging that we'd kicked some unfortunate into a rotor blade and admonishing us for failing to do just that.

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TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED 2

FORMAT: PS3, 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC (ALSO TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** ATARI **DEVELOPER:** EDEN GAMES
PREVIOUSLY IN: E216, E222





There's something entirely sinister about the cast of drivers and its bland tournament, Solar Crown. Unfortunately, despite all the signals, it turns out it is just a very bland driving tournament after all, full of characters who just happen to look like psychopaths

When you're haring across a staggered junction at over 100mph, trading paint with a contemptible prima donna just a point above you on the championship table, how important is the knowledge that a really very nice barber shop is passing on your left-hand side? How many driver selection menus are framed as pool parties that recall Requiem for a Dream's closing 20 minutes? In what universe does earning hundreds of thousands in street racing dollars qualify you for a driving test?

Test Drive Unlimited 2 is a peculiar game and a frankly preposterous open world, but an open world nonetheless. Two, in fact: the original game's Oahu and the newly introduced, topographically precise island of Ibiza. Both are incredible, facilitating that wonderfully existential desire to just drive for driving's sake.

The player happy to floor the pedal with no idea where they'll be when it lifts up will see in *TDU2* the very best that the driving game can offer. They'll charge into an electric storm at twilight and emerge in a sunrise reflected in puddles, on a mountainside overlooking a widescreen panoply of explorable terrain. They'll rediscover Pearl Harbor under the colours of dawn, take an instant challenge from an online passer-by and battle until the high-rises of Honolulu City turn fluorescent at dusk. They'll embark on a coast-to-coast trek and end up sat by the roadside just a mile down the road, lost and taking photographs of boiling asphalt and sizzling carbon fibre.

In the process, they'll allow one world – a maddening one, of bugs and poor design decisions – to vanish into another. One of the industry's great self-saboteurs, there is no job too difficult for Eden Games – which is to say that if things are already very hard, it feels compelled to make them impossible. Why else would it take the original's entirely decent handling model and replace it with one that feels no better? Why would it remake perfectly respectable, if rather bland, avatar models to look like interlopers from outer space? Why impose a whole new layer of social interaction that, even at its best, feels simply pointless?

> Based on the severe miscalculation that reality TV is something aspirational, it advises you to head urgently to the nearest plastic surgeon

At a guess, it's something about aiming to be one of very few functional, sophisticated MMOGs on console, as if that MOOR (Massively Open Online Racer) manifesto suddenly wasn't enough. Infusing it with MMORPG elements such as emotes, an online casino – this feature was a shambles at review time – and on-foot mingling around homes, showrooms and multiplayer lobbies, Eden has laid the groundwork for all kinds of nickel-and-dime DLC and *Sims*-esque social networking. And guess what? Its game is worse because of it.

It's a very MMORPG-esque grind to level ten that introduces you to Ibiza and finally unlocks the airport, opening up Oahu. Feeding your overall level are four others: Social, Discovery, Competition and



Once unlocked, the airport charges a small fee for travel between Ibiza, Oahu and Casino Island, the last of which is like *Dead Or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball* without the beach, the ball or any comparably-sized knockers

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Local traffic laws require drivers capable of power-sliding around hairpins through oncoming traffic to go one better by avoiding cones, stopping in a box and, bizarrely, smashing the speed limit in a calm and orderly manner



Visiting photo studios sets you on treasure hunts for the islands' loveliest scenes, the picky franchise owner setting strict rules on what you capture and when. Luckily, a GPS beacon flashes up whenever you're close to one





From penthouse suites to poolside palaces to a log cabin with a tree in the living room, the homes on offer are certainly desirable, especially if you plan to perform surgery on the sterile – but customisable! – furniture

Collection, encouraging progress by sweeping lateral movements, rather than commitment to a single path. All fine, and complemented well by FRIM, a background money-earner that clocks up bonuses for stylish driving but drops to zero if you mess up. The recipe works – the problem is the ingredients.

Fundamentally, *TDU2*'s entire social game is broken by its avatars, their lifestyle and the options they inspire. Based on the severe miscalculation that reality TV is not a Circus Maximus for grotesque urban hobgoblins but actually something glamorous and inspirational, it makes you choose your model from a handful of fish-eyed freaks and then advises you to head urgently to the nearest plastic surgeon. Only there do you discover that no amount of tweaking can fix your malformed skeleton or face, so it's on to the game's racket of designer clothes stores to conceal as much as possible. We cannot stress this enough: there is nothing you can buy in this game that doesn't make you look like a high-class rent boy or prostitute.

It would be one thing if the damage was self-contained, but it's not – it's toxic. In failing to make good such unnecessary changes, Eden has failed to adequately assure the quality of its game overall. *TDU2* is a magnificent ode to the open road. It's one of the most daring and vital driving games on the market, and testament to Atari's very laudable "freedom to fail" philosophy – even if that did give us such landmark failures as *Enter The Matrix* and *Driver 3*. But it is not – is *still* not – a game fit for release. Roughly a third of our 360 sessions ended with a one-way trip to the loading screen or a complete system freeze; framerates plummeted in network population centres and were reliably unstable whenever other players were involved, and oncoming traffic would vanish and magically reappear. The PC version has been hit repeatedly with server downtime and the removal of features to fix exploits. Read the forums: this is just the tip of the iceberg.

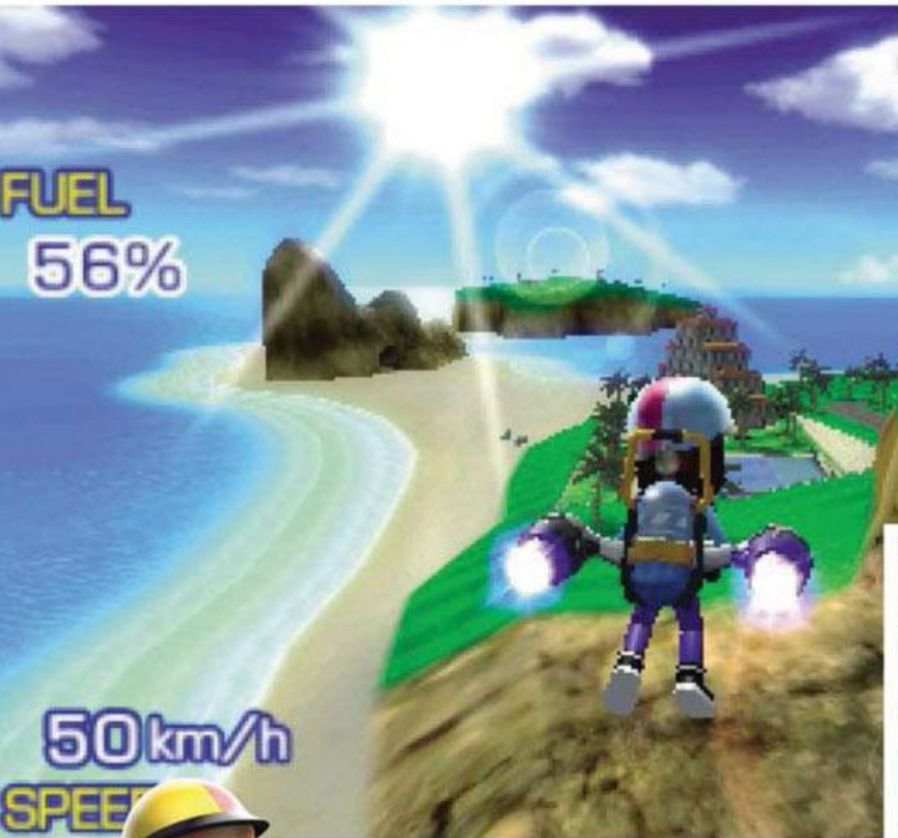
You can take the massively multiplayer game out of the PC, then, but perhaps not the PC out of the game. The endless beta testing, the freewheeling project management, and the agonies and ecstasies of the results: console owners, welcome back to life on the frontier. **[7]**

All cylinders



Releasing a game that's arguably unfit for any platform does at least deflect accusations of being optimised for console. For the most part, *TDU2* deeply feels like a PC game, its highest visual settings overcoming most of the console versions' severest issues. The 'congealing' together of distant forests, for example, is less pronounced, while chronic embarrassments like tearing, violent pop-in and inadequate antialiasing are easily defeated. The PC version is gorgeous, basically, despite release day quirks like patchy steering wheel support and intolerable server downtime. As we went to press, Atari released an open letter to players apologising for it all, and making the game's first premium DLC pack free of charge. Its patching efforts are ongoing.

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Highly manoeuvrable and featuring a powerful brake on the left shoulder button which kills all momentum at a tap, the rocket belt is the vehicle best suited to Free Flight







Camera shots can be saved, though they come out at a low resolution. There's a relaxing pleasure to framing the perfect shot, however, and snapping as you swoop by



PILOTWINGS RESORT

FORMAT: 3DS RELEASE: MARCH 15
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E225

It's funny that *Pilotwings*, a relaxing, sedately beautiful series which really *isn't* about where you end up, but how you get there, is also the one franchise in Nintendo's arsenal which only comes out when the company has a serious technological point to prove. The SNES original was the first title to show off Mode 7 scaling to its fullest potential; *Pilotwings 64*'s expansive vistas were a technical showcase for the console it helped launch. And now, 15 years later, the breezy, carefree *Pilotwings Resort* is perhaps the game in 3DS's launch line-up with the greatest challenge – proving that as well as being an eye-catching novelty, 3D can be gently alluring too.

As with previous entries, *Resort* is all about taking to the skies and taking in the sights, and even Wuhu Island – the bland Mii colony previously seen in *Wii Fit* and *Wii Sports Resort* – can only go so far toward diminishing this appeal. The real problem is the lack of locations – while exploring every tucked-away cave and hidden inlet will take a little time, there's nowhere else to visit once you're done. It's a miserly approach to content, and it comes close to spoiling the view. A view which, with 3D cranked even halfway up, is usually lovely: Wuhu's clear blue skies and rolling green plains are perfect stereoscopic fodder, and the sense of distance and depth certainly enhances them.

Players interested in something more than sightseeing will turn to the game's mission mode – five small batches of challenges which put *Resort*'s three vehicle types through their paces. Glider levels will teach you how to stay aloft and maintain speed in what is arguably the game's trickiest vehicle, while rocket belt levels focus on precise aerial manoeuvring and maintaining fuel supplies. The infinitely fuelled plane provides some of the most reliably entertaining missions – flying after a car popping balloons with your mounted gun, for instance – but it's the gimmicky one-shots which stand out: snapping photos of a lighthouse in the glider, or returning mini-UFOs to their mothership. But just as there's not enough to see, nor is there enough to do. Getting passing grades on every challenge can be done in an hour or two – and it's hard not to start wondering why the alternate vehicle types (see 'Hangar bay') get a paltry one mission each.

Free Flight mode is the alternative, though it frustrates by failing to live up to its name. To begin with, it gives you two minutes to explore, extending the time limit when you've collected enough white balloons. Access to the island at different times of day must be similarly earned. It's a transparent attempt to ration the limited content on offer, and a barrier to simply playing for the pleasure of flight.

Pilotwings, along with Capcom's port of *Super Street Fighter IV*, is one of the 3DS launch line-up's visual standouts: colourful, crisp and with horizons that have never looked so distant. It's disappointing, then, that you'll discover its limits so quickly. **[6]**



Controlling the glider can be a tricky pursuit: thermals may lift you skyward, but if you enter them at the wrong angle they will heavily reduce your speed

Hanger bay



Each vehicle has an alternative version. The rocket belt and the plane simply get larger, more powerful alternatives which control identically. The glider, however, has a pedal-powered version which is sorely underused – it allows you to recover speed the pedal-less glider can't, but requires you to keep an eye on your Mii's stamina bar. An even rarer sight is the flying squirrel outfit – a wingsuit which allows you to make a *Just Cause*-style drop from the island's highest point, offering, in 3D at least, a vertigo-inducing view of your Mii hurtling towards the ground.

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Dog walking is no longer confined to the rigid routes of the original. There's a wide 3D street to navigate, although its mix of gifts, toilet spots and other owners (unless you've topped up your stock of Miis) remains largely the same



Balloons can be blown up to cat-scaring proportions with microphone puffs. The 3DS also does a far better job with vocal recognition, making training that bit easier









Ignore animals for a few days and they grow hungry, parched and filthy. Nothing a few treats, a bowl of water and a quick bath can't solve – 3D suds are particularly appealing



NINTENDOGS + CATS

FORMAT: 3DS RELEASE: MARCH 25 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E225

Nintendogs are immune to the ravages of time. From the day they are brought home to the moment the cart is retired to some forgotten sock drawer, the puppy remains forever young and unchanging. Ever noticed how dogs look like their owners? Nintendo, so good at creating these endless days in the sun, is not one to change them. *Nintendogs + Cats* arrives in the cartridge slot as preppy and playful as the game before it. Almost too much so.

Feature-wise, *Nintendogs + Cats* is a near match for the DS original. Were it not for visual pampering it would be entirely possible to replace the old game with the new without the kids noticing (wait until they've gone to school, naturally). Again, play revolves around routine. Playtime trains the dog, enabling it to win daily contests, in turn creating a cash flow to invest in making said playtime more interesting. This tends to involve comedy hats. If anything, the routine is simplified, removing the trainer points used to judge owner performance. A Nintendog can survive years of negligence, now your reputation can too.

Ironically for a former champion of Nintendo's Touch Generations, *Nintendogs*' interface distances you from the pet. Probing a dog or cat silhouette on the touchscreen performs the same move in the 3D space above. While the pale disembodied hand initially unnerves, it is no odder than a desktop cursor and prevents a plastic prong from impeding the view. Ultimately, haptic feedback is left to be emulated by Nintendo's canny animators, felt in a paw's reluctance to raise or the angry yelp of a tail tug. Dog walking is a particular pleasure, with energetic pups needing firm lead yanks to keep snouts from neighbourhood bins.

Indeed, it is the animation as a whole that makes a return visit worthwhile. If this is the same dog's life, it is a life painted in subtler strokes. Shimmering fur smooths over the digital joins, while freshly sculpted jaws and eyes bring to life the panting of a dog stroked in its sweet spot. The 3D adds depth to fur and offers a sense of body proportion that feeds into the illusion. When curiosity brings the dog close to the screen (they 'see' you through the camera), the head appears not merely bigger, but closer. Likewise, recycled DS toys – Frisbees, balloons, etc – feel fresher when flicked into a 3D room.

And where animators fail to reinvigorate old art assets, there's always the cats. Their job is one of social agitator, a severely hands-off animal in a hands-on world. The title suffix isn't a cute touch, but a comment on their role in the game: this is *Nintendogs*, but now there is a cat in the room. They can't enter contests, go out for walks or learn tricks, but they *can* show total disinterest in everything. Nintendo's eye for animal behaviour separates the game from imitators and renews the interest lost by the returning content.

Old dog, old tricks, fresh antagonist? Surprisingly, this is enough. *Nintendogs + Cats* promises a predictable life played out in unpredictable moments. In this business, there is little more you could want. **[7]**





The home again houses three animals. Selecting a portrait focus the camera on the animal, while the central icon zooms in for a quick scratch. Or you can call their name

Wi-Fi walkies



Hideki Konno, 3DS's hardware director, also headed up the *Nintendogs* team, explaining the game's wide functionality. SpotPass will distribute gifts to resting 3DSes, while players whose paths cross via StreetPass will exchange items, photos, Miis and dog breeds (the game again releases in three breed-exclusive versions). These invisible encounters manifest themselves in game as strange new Miis roaming the dog-walking section. It is a potentially endless flow of user-led DLC, limited only by the game's real-world spread. Those unwilling to leave the house must socialise through augmented reality, using 3DS's AR Cards to coax their pet into the real world. If your cute threshold is particularly high, mascot cards dress the animal up in a particular costume. Warning: real dogs don't take kindly to having their head crammed into Samus's helmet.

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Disappointingly, the design of the rank and file Twisted enemies is somewhat repetitive, their lumbering alien forms rarely appearing characterful or frightening



THE 3RD BIRTHDAY

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (JAPAN) MARCH 29 (US) TBC (UK) **PUBLISHER:** SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE/HEXADRIVE

The monster within



As well as being able to Overdive into friendly hosts, you can also jump into enemies when their health has been suitably lowered. It's a move that causes high damage to the foe, usually finishing them off in an explosion of tatty flesh before you return to your previous friendly host. This ability, when combined with 'Libveration,' a super-powered state that Aya can slip into when a gauge has been sufficiently filled, helps make quick work of even the most challenging bosses.

In the 12 years since protagonist Aya Brea's previous console outing, survival horror has irrevocably changed. *Resident Evil 4*'s bold re-imagining of the genre did away with the tight, locked-off camera angles and awkward, fear inducing controls that its forebear popularised, all features that characterised Brea's *Parasite Eve* titles. As such, Square Enix's dormant survival horror series has undergone more than a name change in *The 3rd Birthday*, being transformed into a quick-paced thirdperson action RPG with a clutch of smart ideas surprisingly well suited to the handheld.

The theme, however, has remained resolute, continuing to draw upon the mythology of Hideaki Sena's 1995 novel, Parasite Eve, in which mitochondria transform lifeforms into monsters. In *The 3rd Birthday*, Manhattan is the locale besieged by mitochondria-driven beasts known as the Twisted, an uprising Brea is drafted in to quell.

A shaky, disjointed story threads through the game, but the premise provides the pivot around which the systems revolve. In *The 3rd Birthday* Brea herself is turned into a parasite, able to 'Overdive' into humans around her, assuming their bodies for her own in a Matrix-esque transformation. This ability allows you to dart between soldier hosts at the press of a button, outflanking enemies not merely by running around them, but by flitting from host to host in the environment, while trying to minimise the damage inflicted to those you 'borrow'.



While many portions of the game have you negotiating long corridors, you can use grenades to open up secret passages that will help you evade clusters of Twisted

From this basic body-switching ability interesting gunfights arise, particularly against the game's hulking boss monsters, which act like giant puzzles in which you must Overdive from pillar to post in search of their glowing weakspot. While it would be easy to dismiss the idea as a gimmick, the execution is strong. Crucially, it's also supported by assured basic gunplay and tight controls to deliver a solid, if occasionally bland, thirdperson shooter, far more competent than Square Enix's previous attempt in *Dirge Of Cerberus*.

Guns, of which you can carry four at a time, are deeply customisable. A metagame allows you to customise Brea herself as you acquire strips of DNA from fallen enemies and piece them together in different arrangements to augment her abilities and buffs. These RPG-esque systems ensure that the game moulds to suit your play style, drawing upon Square Enix's pedigree to welcome effect. But a series of dispiriting difficulty spikes send the game into an anachronistic rhythm, forcing the player from Game Over screens back to checkpoints too often, with the challenge often derived from overwhelming odds rather than any elegant balancing.

The lack of an interesting or memorable supporting cast further smothers those jewels buried within the experience, forcing the appeal on to the possession device at its centre. But even with these failings, *The 3rd Birthday* remains a strong proposition, marrying eastern and western design sensibilities to produce a strong and relevant update to a latent, outmoded series. **[7]**



The decision to focus on a 39-year-old woman is an interesting one, but it's totally undermined by the decision to have her appear aged 20 thanks to her special powers





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The Last Story ticks all the RPG boxes – big boss battles, towns to traverse, and NPCs to natter with. However, with such a rapid succession of different experiences, stripped of superfluity, it feels far removed from convention. Dare we say it, this could be an RPG for people who don't like RPGs?





THE LAST STORY

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (US, EU)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: MISTWALKER/AQ INTERACTIVE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E221, E225

The title is, of course, a playful nod to the pedigree of its director, Hironobu Sakaguchi – the creator of one of the most famous franchises in videogame history and instigator of an entire genre. A title like *The Last Story*, though, carries a certain weight of expectation. Is this really a game to rival his previous work on the *Final Fantasy* series? Is it really the last word on interactive storytelling?

Well, let's start with that story. It's certainly not the first time it's been told. Boy meets girl; the boy, Elza, is from the wrong side of the tracks, a roving mercenary who dreams of a more settled life; the girl, Kanan, is a princess who yearns to see the world outside her circle of privilege. As the backdrop, we're given a band of adventurers drawn into an epic struggle between mystical forces of good and evil. The cinematography is characteristically excellent, the pacing is typically glacial and there are times where Sakaguchi is unable to mask his penchant for saccharine scenes or leaden dialogue. Yet it's blessed with an engaging cast and an emotional power that sweeps you along.

It's interspersed, however, with a game that's elusive and difficult to pin down. On one hand, it hasn't come far from Sakaguchi's inaptly named previous series: anybody who's played any of the *Final Fantasy* titles will be familiar with the thematic concerns of *The Last Story*. There are countless structural similarities, too: the dungeon crawling, the character levelling, the party-based exploration, the towns, the NPCs. Even the characters look like they've stepped out of *Final Fantasy* – one of them looks like Balthier (*FFXII*); another like Yuna (*FFX*); a third, at a push, resembles Cloud (*FFVII*).



In other ways, though, *The Last Story* couldn't be further removed from traditional RPGs. Yes, there are dungeons, towns, NPCs and exploration, but they're blended together in a more cinematically flowing experience than ever before. This is far from the turn-based grinding that characterises so many other games of its type. The game weaves together a frenetic battle system with stargazing scenes and chase sequences. The story, too, almost seems to melt into the action, thanks to cutscenes with semi-interactive transitions. It's more 'gamey' than possibly any other JRPG you'll have played before.

Contradictions abound, not least a variation in quality. The ceaseless banter and chatter between your party goes a long way towards creating a lifelike world – until the next stilted, robotic animation. A glimpse of the sun bursting through the clouds, or blossom floating on the wind, will make your spirits soar – until a grainy wall texture or jarring camera jerk brings them back to the ground with a bump. The combat system manages to combine frantic action with a decent amount of tactics and strategy; yet it's also easy just to stumble through it. For an RPG, *The Last Story* is short and too easy, but also trimmed of the superfluities of many of its brethren.

But for all its inconsistencies, complexities, inadequacies and oddities, *The Last Story* offers an entrancing and seamless flow of interesting experiences. And surely that, in the final reckoning, is what counts. **[8]**



The combat system is almost confusingly easy when you start the game, but as your abilities expand, so do the strategic possibilities – and their sense of empowerment

To be continued...



Far be it from us to call Hironobu Sakaguchi a liar, but there are a couple of ways to continue his so-called 'last story' beyond the end of the narrative. The first is the tougher New Game + option that opens up after completing the game; the second is the game's multiplayer mode. The latter includes a co-operative boss rush mode and competitive player vs player, and it's great if you like that sort of thing. At the time of writing, however, there don't seem to be a lot of people who do, judging by how difficult it is to find someone to play with.



There's plenty of combat, but very little sense of grinding, thanks to the multitude of amazing, almost mathematically elegant set-pieces

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TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2

FORMAT: PC RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY PREVIOUSLY IN: E218, E224



Clicking and dragging arranges men in a line – a longer sweep thins their ranks but widens their front. Horsemen can utilise a wedge formation and drive deep into infantry blocks





The Creative Assembly has devoted time to the multiplayer portion. Battles can now be directed by more than one player, and a Steam-integrated system means clans can be formed and pointed at specific provincial targets in online tugs of war

Agent Orange



In addition to standard units like samurai, *Shogun 2* allows access to a set of assassins, generals and secret police that can be deployed to speed your expansion. Generals are twin-pronged in their service, providing an area of effect buff to morale on the battlefield, as well as bonuses to the troops they ride with on the campaign map. Ninja can sneak into cities or sabotage armies by offing their leader. Metsuke are their opposites, ensuring loyalty and digging out any skulking ninja. Generals also benefit from hangers-on: these range from guards who hit the battlefield alongside your main army, to wily mistresses who keep the man's temperament on an even keel.

If it wasn't for a basic understanding of the Earth's plate tectonics, you'd swear the islands of Japan were custom-built for strategy games. Long, thin, and when tilted on their side, wide enough to fill the typical PC monitor without too many unsightly expanses of sea, they offer 16th-century challenges both unique and tailored to the feudal clans they house. These families each hail from a different corner of the provinces, and have their own unique strengths; they also share a few constants – including a coastline. A strong enough land army would let you stomp down from the north and conquer the region, but nippy coastal vessels render an unprotected rear open to debilitating nibbles. Consolidate and contain on one island alone, and you'll fail to gain the respect and power you need to take the attention – and maybe later the scalp – of the current shogun.

This is The Creative Assembly's second visit to historical Japan, and it has captured the atmosphere expertly. Scored and underpinned by 16th-century-style music and art, *Shogun 2* feels authentic and loved. In previous titles, your identity came from laying claim to a certain geographic position; now, you can derive just as much cod-patriotism from the baroque and ridiculous masks your lead generals strap to their faces before a scrap. It's not the developer's first time retreading old ground – *Medieval 2* raided that castle – but it's the first time the veteran strategy king is scaling back instead of surging forward. Rather than add to a bloated feature pile, they've pruned at *Shogun 2*, making it a focused and neat game. There are markedly few extraneous mechanics, nothing that feels like it doesn't contribute to the effort to become Japan's supreme ruler.

Military might is by far the most expedient way to achieve this. As with previous series entries, *Shogun 2* is split into two core elements: the turn-based campaign map view, and the realtime battle mode. Armies are represented on the former by giant, stomping warriors. Point them toward a similarly oversized enemy soldier and they'll segue into a 70-storey pastiche of a samurai duel. From there, players can choose to auto-resolve fights – letting the computer decide the outcome based on army makeup – or take control directly to influence the outcome.

On the field, combat is monstrously tactical. In dialling the time period back a few centuries from *Empire* and *Napoleon*'s Europe, The Creative Assembly has offered less in the grab-bag of units and weapons. Yet the way *Shogun 2*'s standards – spear, sword, bow and cavalry – interact has a grace and simplicity that demands a greater comprehension of your ever-changing battle. The AI, too, tests players: it'll happily hide units in forests, flank with faster units, even fake a charge to throw your carefully organised spear-wall off.

It's this AI that's traditionally been the gap in the series' armour. Admirably, most of these errors seem to have dissipated: for one example, the computer can now navigate water routes to invasion, and does so with panicking regularity. After many hours of play, the computer was almost free of stupid blunders. On normal difficulty, you could lambast enemy units for hurling themselves against lethal ramparts in siege assaults, but there's a reason history's littered with heroic castle defences: it's *supposed* to be easier to hold out when you're inside a big house.

Sieges tie the game's realtime and turn-based modes together well. Parking an army outside of a city sets them on a siege; should you be shy of a direct fight, your army can just wait it out, starving the residents into handing you the keys. Once the city is yours, improvements and new recruits are button-presses away, assuming you've got the capital and the know-how. A simple research tree is split into two areas: chi and bushido, where the former covers civic areas and the latter military. Go too far down one path while neglecting the other and it's easy for novices to cripple themselves: forget about farming and get the planet's best swords, and you'll need to conquer most of the country before your army gets enough food to stay alive.

Shogun 2 is consolidation with achievable aims, not mad overextension. It's a shrewd and often brilliant game that reaches its destination with most of its goals realised, not discarded and left in the dust like the forced march of its predecessors. **[9]**



Forests provide some comfort from missile attacks, but also slow troops down. Formations are simple, but easily changed on the field. A level of automatic generation means battles are fought in approximations of the campaign map's terrain: pin an army against the coast and the sea will be present in the battle

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Few of the races are spared the antics of street gang The Crazies and their mortal enemies, mercenary outfit Dusklight. Caught literally in the crossfire, the worst you tend to get is a warmed-up engine







MOTORSTORM: APOCALYPSE

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** MARCH 16 (EU), APRIL 12 (US) **PUBLISHER:** SCE
DEVELOPER: EVOLUTION STUDIOS **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E217



The wonderful new Photo Mode (above) seems to share some tech with that of *Gran Turismo 5*, rendering its processed scenes at giant resolutions with perfect quality

How many times must *MotorStorm* remind us that anything is possible during the final lap? We've seen videos too good to be true become demos too shaky to be anything but, yet the result at the finish is always the same: Evolution delivers. It doesn't always serve up the modes, the menus or the polish – it's hard to forget that the first game was released in Japan with its entire multiplayer mode missing – but you get what's important: a game worthy of its title. Less than a year after a dreadfully chaotic E3 build, then, *MotorStorm: Apocalypse* is the game to put Roland Emmerich out of a job.

It's not the nicest way to treat your role model, the timeline of destruction in the movie 2012 inspiring just about everything *Apocalypse* does on screen. Across three chapters of a quite tremendous story mode we see the MotorStorm festival's latest playground, a city full of skyscrapers, parks, suspension bridges and suburbs, violently reclaimed by the Earth. Three characters chase something different through the turmoil: glory for one, a girl for another, and for festival organiser Big Dog, a reckoning.

Each trip from aircraft carrier to death's door and back again takes two 'days' and represents its own difficulty level, the journeys varied in such a way as to give each a unique perspective on the city's demise. For the Rookie, for instance, the track Skyline is a remarkable trip over, around and through the tops of crumbling skyscrapers. Each lap is different, a quake or attack from local anarchists causing a tower to collapse, a prop to explode or some other disaster to reshape the track. The Pro arrives to witness even more destruction, leaving the Veteran player the quite biblical sight of the sea sweeping in to finish the job, oil tankers drifting high above the streets.

All of these races, from the hellish demise of suburbia to a harbour ripped to splinters by a tornado, is an order of magnitude fiercer and cleverer than you expect. The unsung hero throughout is the camera, an inescapable gravity well which sucks everything to within inches of your windscreen: tumbling wreckage, raining glass, predatory monster trucks and suicidal pedestrians. It's an artistic feat worth a dozen *Killzone*s.

But it's also still *that game* – the one in which you can crash in fifth place and respawn in either second or 16th. The one which often seems to forget if a crash should blow you up (requiring a press of X), require a reset to track (press Select) or just leave you in dire straits. The one in which skill isn't always enough. *MotorStorm* has a special relationship with chaos, and if you can keep your head when all about you are throwing their controllers, you're just as likely to lose. Less battle than survival racing, it's happy to let fairness be a stain on the tarmac. **[8]**



As well as being more story-driven than previous titles, *Apocalypse* introduces new vehicles and an 'air cooling' mechanic for lowering engine temperature while jumping

Quake arena



Evolution's focus on multiplayer for *Apocalypse* has introduced perks (which come in threes and include faster respawn times and improved boost), cosmetic vehicle customisation, and a greater choice of drivers (unlocked by ranking up). Earning and betting chips for takedowns, air time, drifting and position is an infectious bonus, though, one which commendably lists race victories as just one of series of race attainments. Those who can tolerate the bendy rules and rubber AI of kart racing should find plenty of reasons to level up, not least discovering every nook, cranny and combustible shortcut of these lovingly handmade tracks. Notable by its absence, though: the much vaunted, *LBP*-inspired Game Mode Creator is delayed until post-launch DLC.

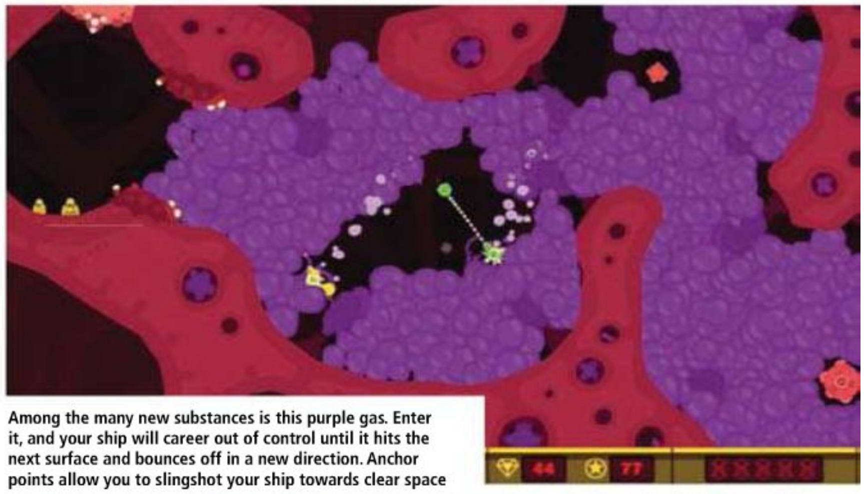
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Many of the bosses, and a few new enemies, offer a variety of bullet-hell patterns to negotiate. Bothering the leaderboards necessitates a fast completion time, transforming stages into speed runs – yet another reason to return to completed levels



Among the many new substances is this purple gas. Enter it, and your ship will career out of control until it hits the next surface and bounces off in a new direction. Anchor points allow you to slingshot your ship towards clear space

PIXELJUNK SHOOTER 2

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCE **DEVELOPER:** Q-GAMES

PixelJunk Shooter 2 doesn't feel like a sequel. While Q-Games has furnished each of the titles in its series with an update, this is the first labelled as a distinct entry, but other than a new multiplayer mode (see 'Control experiment'), it's difficult to see what distinguishes this from, say, the generous second island of *PixelJunk Monsters*. This is testament to the quality of the studio's DLC rather than any criticism of the game, of course, but anyone coming to *Shooter 2* not schooled in its predecessor might wonder whether they somehow missed an opening level.

The game is identical in structure to the first, consisting of 15 stages spread across three chapters, each containing a number of stranded scientists who must be rescued using your grappling hook – a device which acts more like a chameleon's tongue than a winch. Beginning moments after the first *Shooter* ended, you're flung into the digestive juices of a huge subterranean creature that has consumed your ship, and are given seconds to negotiate its twisting, convulsing innards to wash off the corrosive liquid in a nearby pool of water. As introductions go it's a rude awakening, but the lack of hand-holding isn't unwelcome.



Wielding the Hungry Suit changes gameplay dramatically, each opportunity to do so providing a discreet puzzle to be solved. Sending blocks tumbling kills enemies – or you

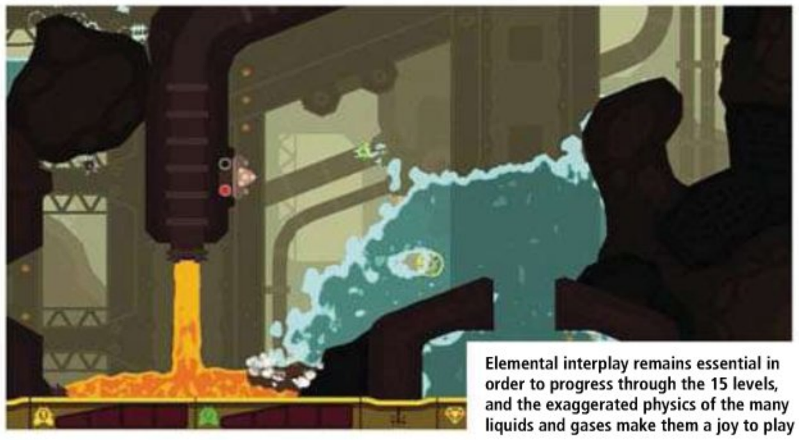
And more importantly, it demonstrates the game's central principles.

Shooter 2 is nothing less than a chemistry set, geared around playful experimentation with the myriad physics-enabled substances that bubble, gush and ignite within its levels. The first game's elements return – water, magma, ice etc – but are joined by new ones, including the aforementioned stomach acid; a bubbly purple gas that reduces control of your ship and requires deft use of the grappling hook to anchor it; and an expanding gelatinous enzyme, the popping destruction of which offers satisfaction only matched by twisting a sheet of bubble wrap in your hands.

Crucially, the new elements complement the old. Combining together to create a broad range of chaotic reactions, each newly introduced substance redefines the potential usefulness (or volatility) of those already encountered. Further depth comes from the variety of ship 'suits' that can be worn which allow players to wield elements in a more focused manner. While the majority of these will be familiar to players of the first game, there are two additions. The first, the Hungry Suit, ostensibly transforms the game into *Dig Dug*, restricting the player to four-way tunnelling movement trough undigested foodstuffs, neatly contrasting the floaty analogue nature of free flight. The second is the Light Suit, which illuminates the final third of the story mode – in which levels are plunged into darkness – frightening away creatures that lurk in the pitch black.

The new bosses are imaginative – an encounter with a fire-breathing turtle which includes nods to bullet hell shooters and *Galaga* is a particular highlight – but present considerable difficulty spikes for those settled into the comparatively sedate experience of the rest of the game. It's an identity crisis that plagued the first title; Q-Games' level designers seem unable to decide whether they're making a user-friendly physics playground, or a punishingly difficult shooter. Moreover, the precision required to survive exposes the occasional inadequacy of *Shooter 2*'s inertia-laden controls. Despite unlimited attempts, by the time you reach the final encounter you'll feel sure Q-Games has crossed the line from deviousness to pathological cruelty.

In such situations, two guns are better than one, of course, and *Shooter 2*'s returning cooperative play allows the steep challenge to be shared, while locating all of *Shooter 2*'s hidden gems and bonus scientists makes revisiting levels a compulsive pleasure. The chunky, appealing visuals conceal a shooter with real bite, albeit one that will feel familiar. But while *PixelJunk Shooter 2* may seem more like an expansion than a standalone game, there's no shortage of new ingredients to enrich what was already a lively concoction. **[8]**



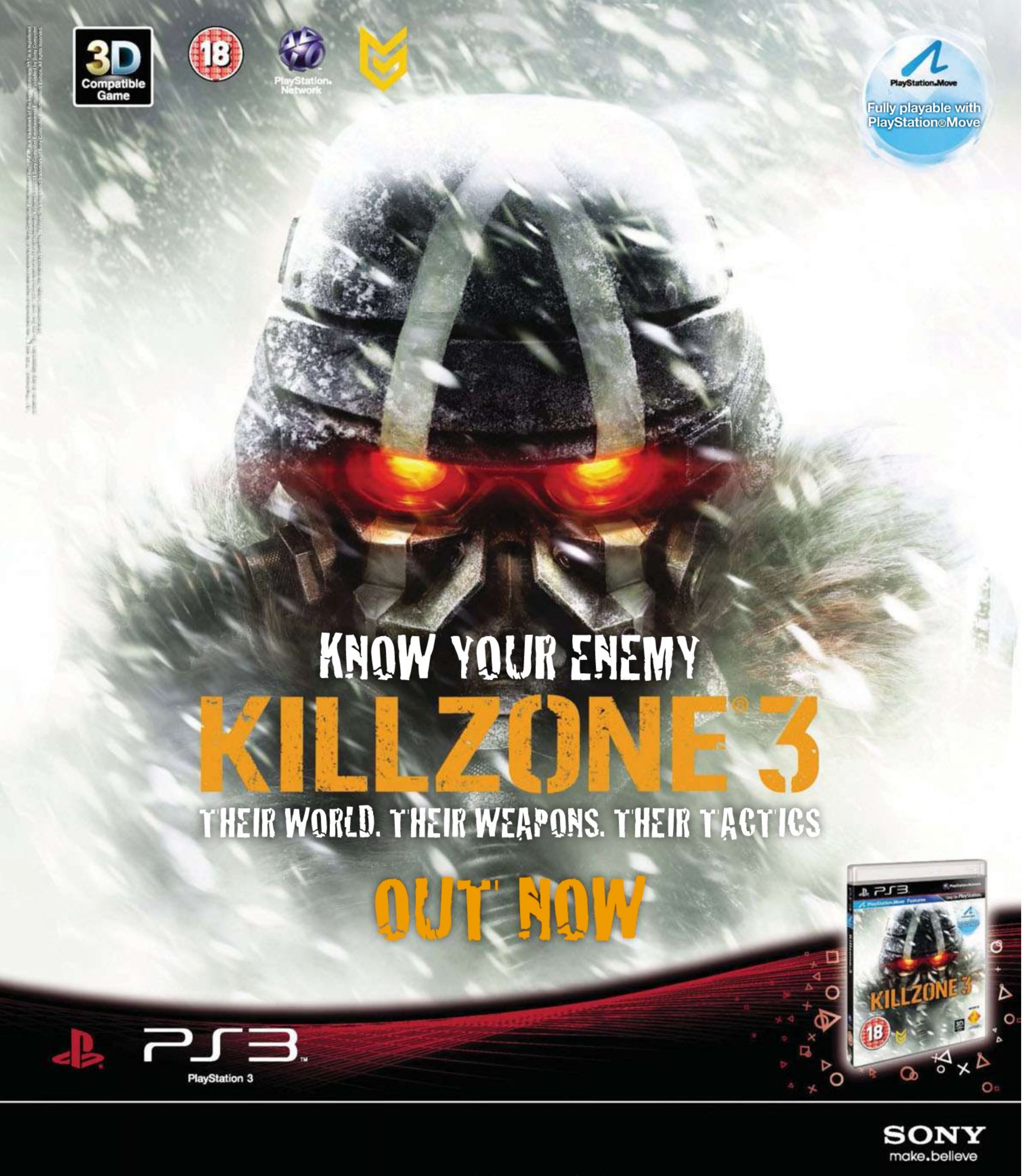
Elemental interplay remains essential in order to progress through the 15 levels, and the exaggerated physics of the many liquids and gases make them a joy to play

Control experiment



As well as cooperative play, Q-Games has introduced a competitive element to *Shooter 2* in the form of a new mode, Online Battle. Games take place in asymmetrical maps over five rounds with one player attempting to rescue scientists while the other tries their best to sabotage the attempt. When the rescuer is killed – or the timer runs down – roles are reversed. Players are able to choose ship and weapon types before entering each level, and new power-ups can be bought using coins earned from play. It's an intriguing take on PVP that boasts all the exuberance of the singleplayer game.

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Weapons provide some useful and horrific finishers. Downing a foe with a baseball bat before lining up a perfect home-run on their head is second only in its terrifying realisation to a blade in the gut (left). There are more QTEs than ever (below left), as the most casual street-fight can open with button prompts. Playing through Saejima's fugitive storyline will see you regularly plunged into rundowns with the police







YAKUZA 4

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** MARCH 25
PUBLISHER: SEGA **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E220, E221



Cage-fighting makes a fleeting return, and once again awkwardly displaces the combat system in a one-on-one scenario. *Yakuza*'s fights are at their best when you're outnumbered and overpowered

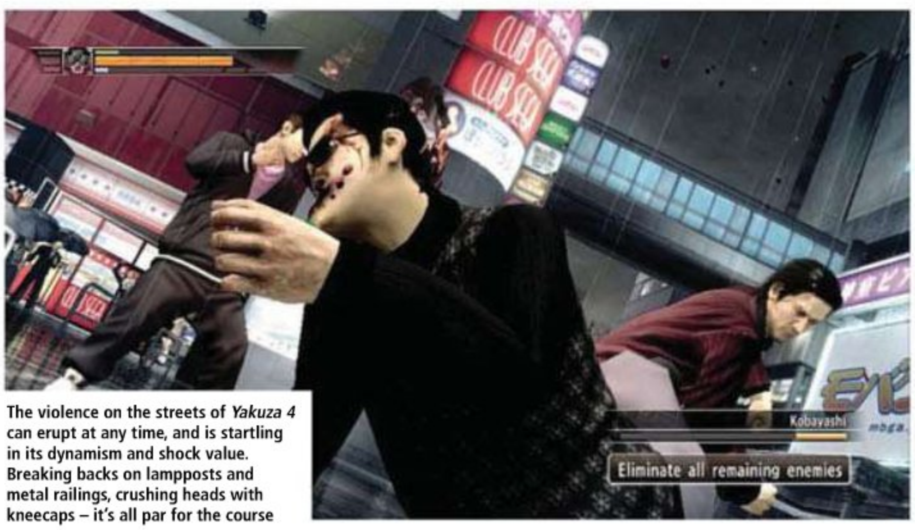
Following *Yakuza 3*'s detour into laboured moralising and poor plotting, the fourth entry in Toshihiro Nagoshi's gangster soap opera tries once more to shake things up. No longer is the narrative dedicated solely to Kazuma Kiryu's expressionless face and holier-than-thou proselytising; it's an ensemble piece linked by the theme of revenge and a hunt for ugly truths in the city of Kamurocho. Newcomers Akiyama, Saejima and Tanimura have richer, more involving stories than Kiryu, so it's a shame their muscular frames have to retread much of the earlier games' territory. Knucklehead Saejima's portion of the lengthy story is little more than a condensed mash-up of the original Yakuza's highlights, from a visit to underground 'info dealer' Kage to a ballpark bust-up.

Though the content of *Yakuza 4* resembles traditional JRPGs, with its random battles and side-quest mania, the structure segregates each character into its own journey before bringing them together for a big send-off. The ensemble doesn't become a group until late into proceedings which means that, though they overlap, the experience of each character is mostly singular: you're essentially playing the opening four hours of a *Yakuza* game four times over. It keeps things fresh, certainly, but it also relinquishes your grip on any one story, forbidding you from becoming truly invested in any of the narrative strands.

The storytelling may still be a little infantile, but the game engine has matured like one of the many fine whiskeys lining the shelves of *Yakuza 4*'s bars. Noses explode like bloody geysers, faces bruise and break under a gratuitous amount of finishing moves. With its heightened realism, *Yakuza*'s street fights edge away from the cartoon, *Streets Of Rage* gimmickry of previous iterations and become rather more disturbing and affecting in their authenticity. Suddenly, offing a group of 'street punks' in front of a throng of cheering pedestrians is no longer attractive: it's macabre.

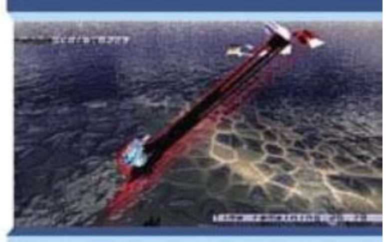
The trimmings are a big part of why the *Yakuza* brand has such staying power, and *Yakuza 4* carries on the grand tradition. The hostess grooming business – axed from *Yakuza 3*'s western release – is present, offering you the chance to dress your lady according to customers' tastes. It's as exploitative as it sounds, but it's an undeniably simple and effective micro-management sim that's recycled well later on. The pedestrian world has much more of a draw this time around, too: Kamurocho is now as dense with helpful passers-by as sociopaths. Photographing 'Revelation' events – set-pieces dotted around town for your snap-happy enjoyment – is as bizarre and comedic as ever, adding further to Kamurocho's sense of place and humour.

Like the dwindling, old-fashioned yakuza that drift in-and-out of the game's focus, *Yakuza 4* is ultimately too set in its ways to welcome anyone new to the family, and too laden with cutscenes to let its nuances shine. The converted may be riveted by *Yakuza*'s new anti-heroes, but it's far from the pay-off patient fans deserve. **[7]**



The violence on the streets of *Yakuza 4* can erupt at any time, and is startling in its dynamism and shock value. Breaking backs on lampposts and metal railings, crushing heads with kneecaps – it's all par for the course

Rear end

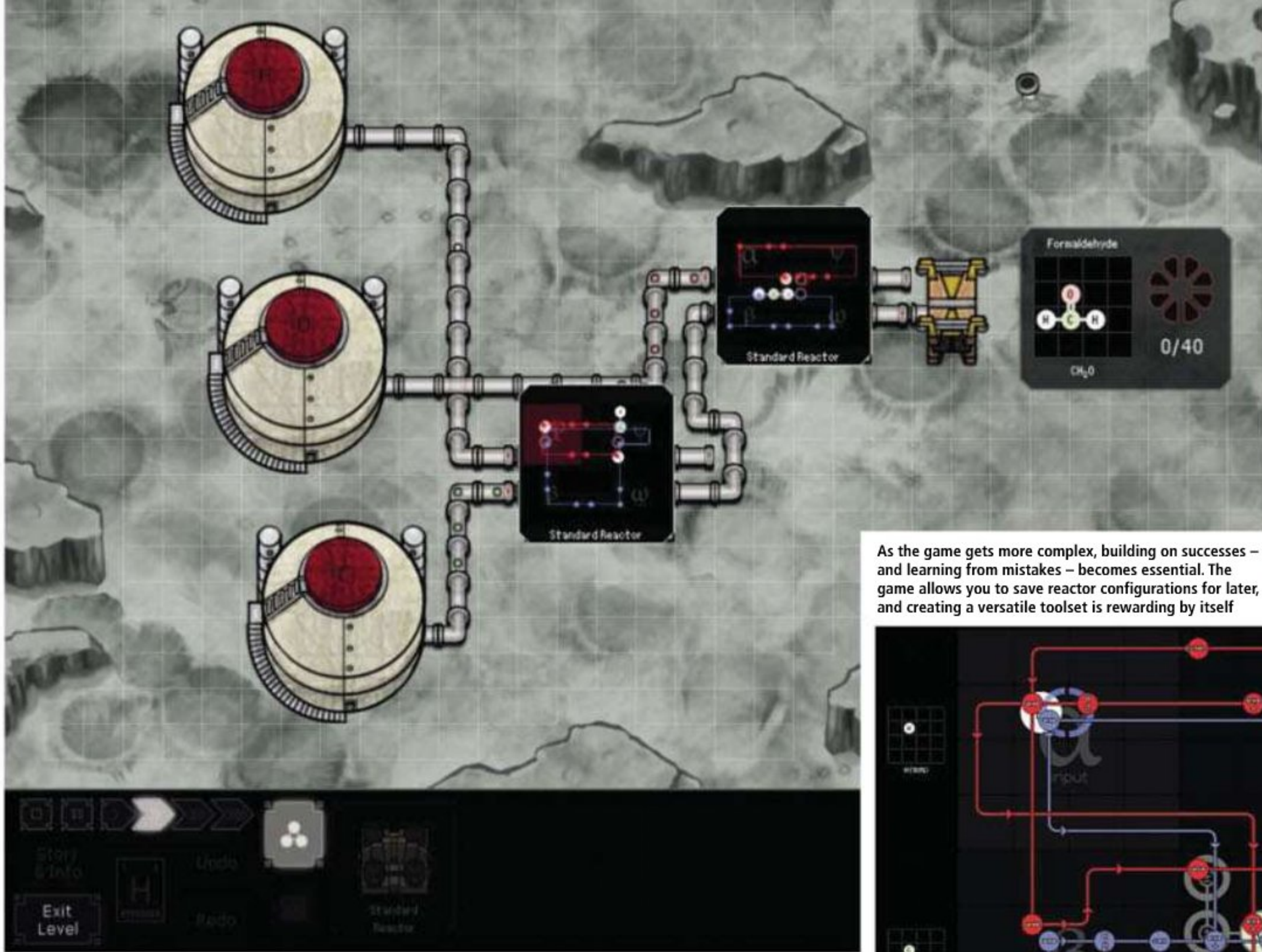


Of the many distractions littering the alleys and undergrounds of Kamurocho, it's again arcade shooter *Boxcelios* that has our vote for most addictive and instant hit. For *Boxcelios 2* there's a slight change in the perspective of the *R-Type*-style shooter, forcing you to barrel roll over the shimmering landscape as you blast seven bells out of the onslaught of bosses. Overall, the Club Sega sites in the game are still a little empty (and still tease with their unusable *Virtua Fighter* cabinets), but they're far less intimidating than the gambling parlours.

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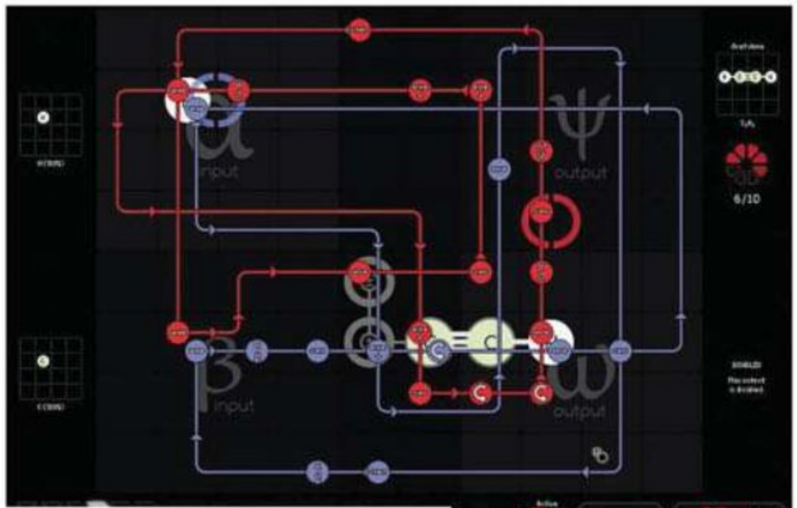
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Certain stages up the stakes, adding dangers that only careful management can negate. In these scenarios it's not enough to simply produce the right chemicals – timing and placement must also be taken into account



As the game gets more complex, building on successes – and learning from mistakes – becomes essential. The game allows you to save reactor configurations for later, and creating a versatile toolset is rewarding by itself



Inelegant processes are usually more fun to watch, but won't make an impression on the stats page. Efficiency is only as important as you make it, but establishing some best practices will help you out in the long run



SPACECHEM

FORMAT: PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ZACHTRONICS INDUSTRIES
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Dopamine is the neurotransmitter associated with the brain's reward system – the chemical, we're often told, responsible for the success of social gaming and grind-heavy MMOGs, providing cynical and exploitative design practices with direct access to our limbic system. It seems fitting, then, that a game about manipulating chemicals should stand as testament to gaming's unique ability to reward creativity, lateral thinking and perseverance.

A fusion of circuit diagram and model railway, *SpaceChem* tasks you with running molecule-building reactors to meet each level's chemical quota. Within a reactor, a pair of 'waldos' – red and blue – travel along separate courses, carrying out your instructions (e.g. picking up or dropping atoms) as they pass them. Everything from the starting positions of the waldos to the routes they take is under your control – a startling and initially intimidating amount of freedom, especially when the game introduces multiple reactors, each with their own internal processes.

The reactor interface feels more like a tool than a game, and it's easy to get the impression that you've been hired for a job for which you simply aren't qualified. A brief tutorial makes a decent go of breaking the interface down, however, and the basic principles become second nature more quickly than you might expect. The game does little, though, to prepare you for the advanced application of those principles, with impossible-seeming scenarios cropping up before the first world is through. In the face of this predicament it's easy to lose heart, but sticking with the game through this awkward initial period reveals something very special.

The triumph of *SpaceChem* is that overcoming these situations is more a case of inventing a solution than discovering one – creating a technique on your own terms that, once learned, you find yourself reusing in later stages. This is the game's masterstroke, legitimising the pride you take in even inefficient solutions – they may not be perfect, but they're yours.

An online comparison feature provides further reason to refine your methods. It's only a shame that the game doesn't take this aspect further – while you can upload recordings to YouTube, *SpaceChem* cries out for a full-blown solution-sharing system. This is the kind of game that will have you dragging in bewildered friends and family members to marvel at your creations, and the more Zachtronics Industries can do to support this, the better. Likewise, the lack of a straightforward means of transferring saves between PCs is frustrating. *SpaceChem* is ideal netbook fare, but maintaining separate games on different machines dilutes the experience. When a game's biggest faults are not being able to share it with everyone you meet or take it everywhere you go, though, that says something.

SpaceChem is not an educational game, but like the very best of its kind it has something to teach us about the way we confront challenges and respond to our mistakes. It is first and foremost a game about learning, capable of leaving you feeling smarter than you were before – even if the game itself always remains a step ahead. It's frequently punishingly difficult, and demands a level of perseverance that some may find off-putting – but the meticulous, crystalline integrity of *SpaceChem*'s design invites its players to excel, and intrinsic rewards for doing so are tremendous. **[9]**

The elements of style



On the surface, *SpaceChem* isn't much to look at – but watching a working process tick away like a modernist Rube Goldberg machine is one of the game's real highlights. The way the soundtrack's sweeping orchestral accompaniment blends with the rhythmic bleeps of a happy reactor rounds out a game that is far more aesthetically accomplished than initial impressions suggest. There's also surprising depth to be found in the game's unlockable vignettes, illustrated snippets of prose that tell the story of a young reactor engineer uncovering the secrets of the SpaceChem Megacorporation.

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FIGHT NIGHT CHAMPION

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA **DEVELOPER:** EA CANADA **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E223

Putting the '*Champion*' in what would otherwise be *Fight Night: Round 5* is a cutscene-driven, do-or-die story mode which charts the rise and fall of Andre Bishop, a prospect and eventual superstar who ends up fighting off muggings in the prison showers. It's a coarse and sepia-toned affair which serves up a murderer's row of boxing caricatures – the tireless dancer, the one-punch KO artist – who belong in a *Final Blow* cabinet from the '80s. Awful, isn't it?

Actually, no. In a dramatically overhauled and often definitive *Fight Night*, *Champion* is a smart and exceptionally presented move. With its flash KOs and clichés worthy of Police Squad!, it's nothing short of an exorcism for both the series and its players' established demons. You can bang your head against it; restart, continue and return at a later date; but rarely can you exploit it. By the time it's done with you, you'll know what it means to circle away from a power hand, close off the ring and, most importantly, fall and get back up.

It's a purer simulation mindset, then, that both game and player carry into the sprawling Legacy mode and online, which in the latter case include asynchronous multiplayer in the form of offline stat comparisons, persistent gyms for up to 32 players with rivalry support, and the customary Exhibition and Ladder modes. Having identified fundamental ergonomic flaws with the analogue-looping Total Punch Control, Full Spectrum Punch Control maps the jabs, hooks and uppercuts to mere directional flicks; the precision takes some getting used to, but is a vast improvement, and an overture to those who persistently use the buttons. The game still pretends that a boxer can't block, lean and step simultaneously, but it's hard to imagine an elegant solution.

Fight Night has tirelessly rebuilt itself when many expected retirement. Cautious improvements from *Round 4* – the removal of the cut-man game and automation of recovery – have been confidently reinforced, while ring physics, ragdolls and cloth dynamics are in a different class to the chaotic *Round 3*. EA Canada is a jewel in its publisher's crown. **[9]**





A casual, flinching glance at the game's visual and narrative violence can be misleading: its science is just as sweet



Round 4 laid the groundwork for Full Spectrum Punch Control, quickening punches and sacrificing, some believed, the action chess game. But EA Chicago was never that restrained, and the system gets it right



GODS EATER BURST

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (JP, US), MARCH 18 (EU)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI **DEVELOPER:** SHIFT INC



Burst offers all the multiplayer options you'd expect, but also allows players to trade Avatar Cards. Once traded, players can use friends' Gods Eaters as NPCs in their own games



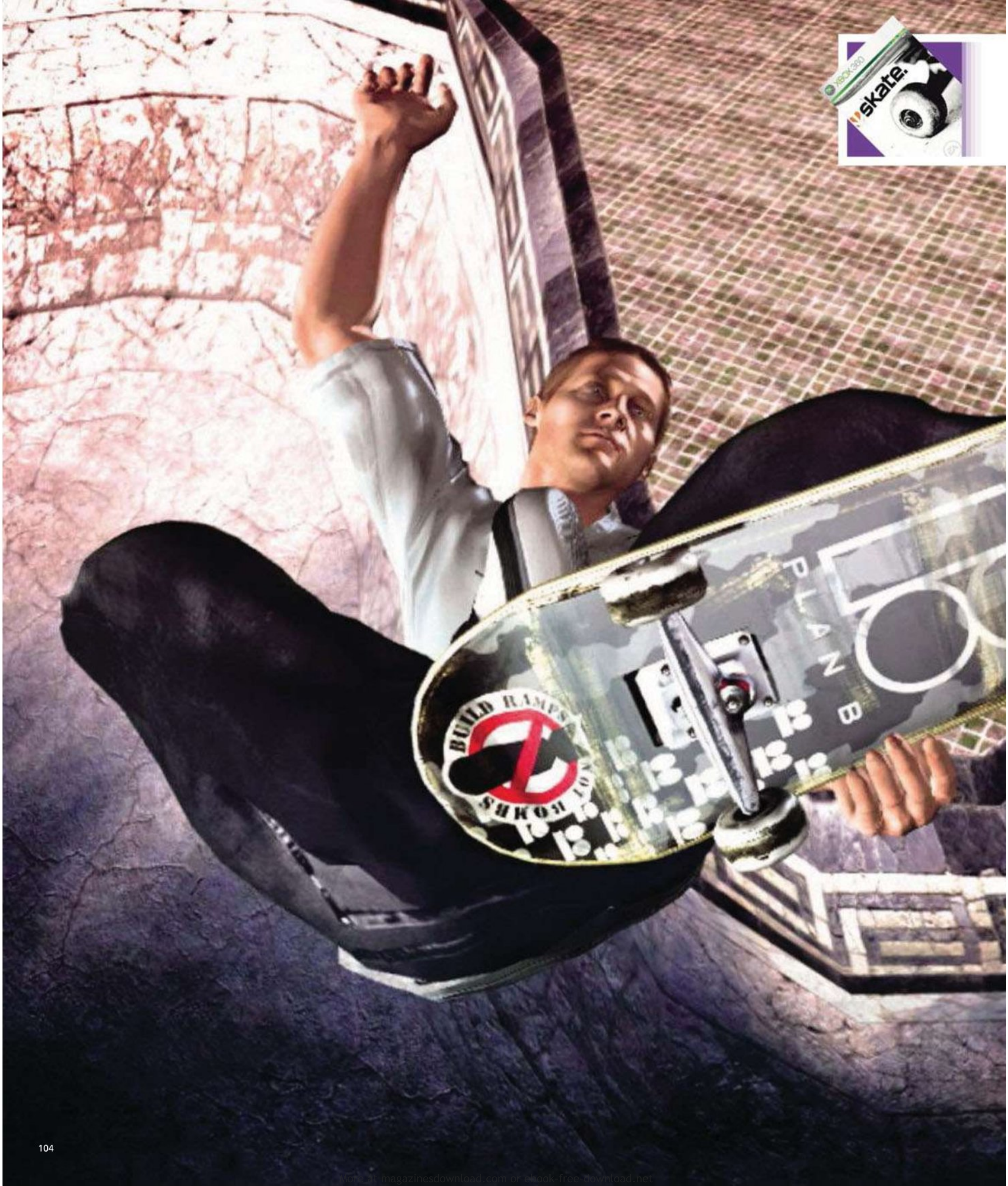
NPCs do a good job of supporting players during fights, reviving and distracting when necessary. A command menu offers a limited range of orders, but can't compare with the possibilities in playing with a human team

How can two games with such similar focus be so different? While Capcom's *Monster Hunter* series offers up expansive environments, a multitude of activities and a seemingly unending torrent of hand-holding tutorial missions, *Gods Eater Burst* goes straight for the jugular. After quickly learning the basics, you're left to experiment against ever more deadly prey in the game's comparatively small arenas – with the onus placed very much on the battle rather than the hunt. And where Capcom's series makes few concessions to the lone player, *Burst*'s other major addition – a fully fledged and expansive story mode – makes the whole experience a little less lonely.

The histrionic plot, delivered by typically over-reaching voice actors, describes an apocalyptic future in which Aragami – creatures able to take on the shapes of whatever they consume – have reduced mankind to small pockets of resistance. As part of that fight, your aim is to turn their abilities against them using your God Arc, a weapon forged using cells from fallen Aragami. Able to shift between blade, gun and shield, the weapon can also devour stricken enemies, giving you access to the titular Burst mode and one of the creature's more powerful attacks.

On paper, all this streamlining looks good, but in stripping away *Monster Hunter*'s peripheral elements, *Burst* struggles to distract players from the grind. The distressed urban arenas' narrow, washed-out palettes and unintuitive control scheme, which maps multiple functions to most buttons, don't help. Despite deep customisation (right down to the trajectories of your bullets) and some truly striking monster designs, it's impossible to shake the feeling that you're playing an inferior imitation of a better game. Moreover, *Burst*'s key selling point – its robust singleplayer campaign – fails to compensate for the fact that stories created with others are often the most memorable. **[6]**

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TIME EXTEND

SKATE

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **ELECTRONIC ARTS**
DEVELOPER: **EA BLACK BOX**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **2007**

How an upstart skating franchise rolled over its established competition by tapping straight into the renegade ethos of skateboard culture itself



In order to pull off a grind players must time their ollie perfectly then get into the right position on a rail

Skaters look at their urban environment in a different way to civilians. They see streets, sidewalks and anything else flat and hard as potential parts of a vast playground. Their skewed view of the public space isn't too dissimilar from the mindset of a videogame level designer, who must consider the architecture they construct as a play space for millions of gamers.

The first videogame to exploit this way of seeing the world was 1999's *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, an exuberant, punky and wildly popular genre definer that made every player come to feel like a skateboarding superhero. After ten minutes with the game it was difficult to look at a kerb or park bench the same way again. Every edge became another rail to grind, each sloped surface an opportunity to launch oneself into space. Accordingly, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* was a smash hit spawning a lucrative franchise for Activision and inspiring a boom in the popularity of real-world skateboarding.

But by 2007 Tony Hawk began to show his age. That year would see the ninth proper entry in Hawk's venerable videogame series. By then Activision and developer Neversoft had thrown everything but the kitchen sink at the series to keep the franchise fresh. They dabbled, mistakenly, with the outrageous humour of the popular TV series Jackass and laboured, somewhat successfully, to bring Tony Hawk into an open world. But fans were beginning to feel fatigued and bored by continual updates to the series.

What the skateboarding videogame really needed was a fresh set of eyes. That new perspective came courtesy of EA Black Box and its game *Skate*, released in the autumn of 2007 to square off against *Tony Hawk's Proving Ground*. The pre-Christmas dust-up between proven quantity and unknown upstart was a doozie. In the end EA would brag that *Skate* outsold *Proving Ground* nearly two to one. Talk about fresh blood.

For its ground-up re-imagining, EA Black Box seemed to keep one ethos at heart: keep it real. Where Tony Hawk's escapades saw him catching air on the moon, *Skate* sought to remain relatively down-to-Earth. And in that spirit *Skate* began with a live-action video.

Through the lens of a shaky, hand-held camcorder viewfinder we see a young male skating a line on the grounds of a school. He ollies over a bench, swerves down an outdoor hallway, kickflipping past a bank of lockers before leaping down a flight of stairs and kissing the metal handrail with his board. He lands his trick on the sidewalk and his momentum thrusts him into the street where he is promptly crushed by a bus.

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The camera follows skaters from behind and below waist level. But at any time the player can pause the game, review footage and cut a clip



SKATE DATE

Skate's online play was more proof-of-concept than success. Online matches allowed gamers to race, jam and play S.K.A.T.E against one another. But many of the venues felt crowded and small compared to the vast sprawl of San Vanelona. And latency frequently removed all the fun from the cramped jam sessions. One of EA Black Box's biggest challenges (and successes) with the series was in finding ways to refine the online experience. In 2009, *Skate 2* granted skaters more breathing room during contests. And a third entry the very next year allowed friendly skaters to collaborate in online group challenges. In the end, the game's shareable video clips would remain its greatest innovation.

"Yo," the cameraman says, "Somebody call an ambulance." The voice we hear is that of Giovanni Reda, a photographer and film-maker in the skateboarding scene. Like the Lakitu Brother that Shigeru Miyamoto recruited to play the role of cameraman in *Super Mario 64*, Reda handles all videotaping duties in *Skate*. After the traffic accident Reda will follow the player, offering advice, encouragement and the occasional dis. But, most importantly, he'll be capturing everything the player does on tape. It's rare for a videogame to expend so much energy justifying the existence of the in-game camera. But here the lore does double duty. Not only does Reda capture every realtime moment of the game from the traditional, waist-level angle of the DIY skateboarding video, but having Reda around means the player will also have footage to mess about with.

One of Skate's many innovations is the ability to pry the tape out of Reda's camera at any time and edit recent action into a savable, sharable clip. *Skate* commits 100 per cent to the premise. Against the black of load screens one can pick out the faint noise of tracking static. The player's combo meter reads like film, new frames spooling out as the multiplier increases. Later, when the player explores the game's world, Reda serves as a portable quest giver, granting access to trick challenges anywhere. The conceit, of course, is that Reda needs impressive new clips to help spread the word about your skateboarding prowess. The ideas of seeing and being seen run through *Skate*'s core like the grain in the wood of a skateboard deck.

To that end, EA hosted a website called skate.Reel (now defunct) where players could upload and share their clips. The feature, and a key differentiator with the hermetically sealed *Tony Hawk* games, wound up flourishing within later versions of the game – serving as the seed for a burgeoning community of virtual skateboarders, fans who would use the tools in *Skate*'s sequels to create full-length machinima that perfectly ape the look of contemporary skateboarding videos.

But all this is putting the cart before the horse. There's still the matter of the bus accident in the game's opening cinematic. After a wild, live-action ambulance ride set to The White Stripes' Girl, You Have No Faith In Medicine and rife with cameo appearances from all the game's pro skaters, you find yourself in hospital, about to undergo massive reconstructive surgery. That's *Skate*'s way of both rationalising character customisation and bending the cliché of the amnesiac RPG hero to its needs. With its videogame-style rebirth complete, *Skate* sets the player down in the fictional town of San Vanelona.

It is in a neighbourhood skate park that players gets their first skateboarding lessons. The tutorials here resemble the path to rehabilitation in more ways than one. Outside of the in-game automobile accident there are real-world needs for re-training. All the habits and impulses learned playing *Tony Hawk* games have to be unlearned. Picking the game up fresh in 2007 was a confounding and somewhat frustrating experience. After years of having jumps and grinds mapped to buttons, the shock of a new way to skateboard in a videogame was profound. Muscle memory had to be scrubbed and re-written.

After years of having jumps and grinds mapped to buttons, the shock of a new way to skateboard was profound. Muscle memory had to be re-written

All of those difficulties were wrapped up in *Skate*'s 'Flick It' control scheme. In *Tony Hawk* games a mere button press was all it took to pull off an ollie – the basic building block of nearly every skateboarding trick. *Skate* required players to crouch by pulling down on the right thumb stick, then jump by quickly pushing it up. That action would propel the player and, most importantly, their board into the air. From there players could experiment by popping the stick up in diagonal or sweeping it around the outside curve of the thumb stick's well to execute myriad elaborations on the ollie.



Nestled beneath an overpass, this site is reminiscent of Portland's Burnside skate park, seen in *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*

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It is possible to pull off super-human skateboarding feats in Skate, but the strict physics encourage players to stay within the bounds of reality

That wasn't the only frustration the *Tony Hawk* fan would find in *Skate*'s tutorials. Grinds were much more difficult to pull off, too. In Activision's games players need only be in the vicinity of an edge and hit the correct button to find themselves jerked into a grind. *Skate* requires the player to line up the perfect angle and time their ollie so that the board lands on the kerb and begins to slide. Jump too early or too late, and the board catches on the cement, sending your avatar into an ugly, rag-doll face-plant.

Skate is, in no uncertain terms, a skateboarding simulator. All the vagaries of the control scheme are tied to this fact. They're a lot to grasp at first. But once digested they give the player all the tools they need to hone a skateboarding style. Where *Tony Hawk* doles out skill points, abilities and special moves as rewards for progression, *Skate* gives them a complete toolbox in the opening moments of the game. The rest of the experience involves mastering those natural abilities.

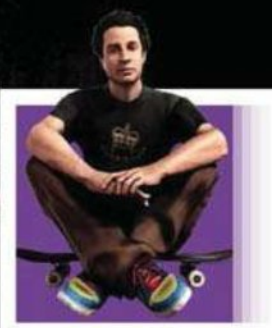
This is where *Skate* sticks to the script. Players follow the classic rags-to-riches trajectory, trying to impress other skaters, earn sponsors, win contests and, eventually, compete in the X-Games. These challenges are peppered throughout the vast landscape of San Vanelona. The best moments are the briefly aforementioned video challenges. They're puzzles of a sort. Each calls for a handful of tricks to be executed and players are asked to use their creativity and skills to find a place in their town where they can pull off all those tricks. Also vital to the spirit of *Skate* are 'spots' – locations peppered throughout the town where skaters are known to congregate. It is the duty of the player to 'own' each spot by pulling off a specific trick and posting a new high score while doing it.

All these challenges are made more humane by a feature that allows players to drop a spawn point at an exact spot in the game world then warp back to it by nudging the D-pad. This one bit of realism-shattering trickery cuts out the tedium of skating back into position to re-attempt a difficult trick.

The game's one sour note is S.K.A.T.E – a call and response head-to-head contest in which competitors try to stymie each other by pulling a trick that their opponent can't copy. Each failure to match the move earns you one of the scarlet letters. Fail five times and you lose. Against computer-controlled opponents these duels seem suspiciously cheap – especially when the bots always seem to nail your tricks. The larger problem is that the matches just take too much time, and they're antithetical to the ethos of skateboarding. Skaters don't copy. They march to their own beat.

Modern skateboarding may have been born on the coast, but San Vanelona is landlocked. The game begins in the hillside suburbs – where homes, schools and shopping malls all provide plenty of pavement for the newbie skater. It spills downhill towards The Res – a district with the sloped feel of San Francisco – and into Old Town where vaguely European colonial-era buildings give way to an industrial district skirted by one of California's signature cement drainage ditches. Due west is Downtown – a typical American city centre in which security guards work overtime to make the lives of skaters miserable.

Though players can strike out and explore the city at will, San Vanelona's terrain follows a logical progression – one that speaks directly to the soul of the skater. Beginnings happen, as they do for most Americans, in the suburbs. The game peaks in the shadows of skyscrapers – where the marble-rich plazas and public sculptures constructed by the captains of the economy become the stolen playthings of skateboarders. That re-connection, from the pioneering reconsideration of space in *Tony Hawk* to the genre refining of *Skate*, is what skaters and critics can both comfortably call a satisfying 360.



TUNE TOWN

Music and skateboarding are inextricably intertwined. During its infancy, street skating found a bedfellow in punk rock. Then in the '90s – as urban kids began to step on to boards – hip-hop began to play a major part in the movement. Big Brother magazine once called this cultural dichotomy in the subculture 'hesh vs fresh'. You can't make a modern skateboarding game without nods to both. That's why the game's lively and inclusive soundtrack bounces between Motörhead and N.W.A. *Skate* doles out the recognisable music sparingly – licensed tunes pop up during contests and challenges. A good part of the game is spent skating to original instrumental tracks – peppy songs that work to make San Vanelona feel like a town that merits its own soundtrack.





San Vanelona has a diverse population. Bodyguard Chris 'Big Black' Boykin (second from left) is a rare non-skater

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THE MAKING OF…
OMIKRON: THE NOMAD SOUL

When Heavy Rain auteur David Cage met David Bowie, they created a cyberspace oddity filled with soul-sucking demons, sex shops and satirical cola advertisements

FORMAT: **DC, PC** PUBLISHER: **EIDOS** DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM** ORIGIN: **FRANCE** RELEASE DATE: **1999**



Concept art shows the care lavished on the band and character models, including Iman (far left) who arrived in Paris with her husband and gamely agreed to be involved

French game developer **David Cage** isn't enjoying his trip on the London Underground. It's 1998 and he's southbound on the District Line. Destination: Wimbledon, home to the Lawn Tennis Association and also, more importantly, the HQ of Eidos Interactive. In a backpack he carries a PC – a monster of a machine, powerful enough to run the demo of his passion project *Omikron: The Nomad Soul*.

Cage is, understandably, on edge. The rig on his shoulder is heavy, but his hopes weigh heavier still. He desperately needs this to go well; across the Channel, Cage's start-up company Quantic Dream is running out of time.

Omikron began with an impossible vision. Cage, a professional musician with a background in commercials, wrote an initial, 200-page concept document outlining the kind of game he wanted to play.

"I was dreaming of a game with an open-world city where I could go wherever I wanted, meet anybody, use vehicles, fight and transfer my soul into another body," he tells us. "When my friends read it they said: 'David, this is impossible. It's not technically feasible, don't even think about it.'"

Visionaries don't waste time wringing their hands over something as passé as feasibility, however. It didn't matter to Cage that PC 3D cards were still in their infancy. He took the money he'd made from scoring commercials, hired a team of six friends with development experience and started production in a sound-proofed studio that once belonged to Belgian singer Jacques Brel. There were thick doors, no windows and everyone was crammed into a 15m square space.

Cage insisted on paying the team, not for altruistic reasons, but so that he could be the boss. "I wanted to be able to demand something of them, ask them to be there on time in the morning and work long days." They went into instant crunch mode, having just six months to make the impossible demo; if they didn't finish it before then, Cage would be broke and the dream would be over.

In the penultimate week of development, Cage got on the phone and asked publishers in the UK if they were interested in seeing his realtime 3D demo. Eidos said yes and when John Kavanagh, the VP of product development, saw the impossible demo with its dynamic city environment and motion-captured, canoodling pedestrians he signed Quantic Dream immediately – just three days before Cage's start-up money ran out.

Omikron: The Nomad Soul showcases more ideas in its first ten minutes than most games achieve in their entire duration.

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Released in November 1999, two years before *Grand Theft Auto III* popularised the 3D open-world concept, *Omikron* invited players into an awe-inspiringly dynamic, futuristic city. It also featured a story about demons, hell and the transmigration of souls. "It's the world's first Buddhist game," quips **Phil Campbell**, who was then senior designer at Eidos. "Buddhist with guns, I call it."

Set in a totalitarian city ruled by a supercomputer and replete with RoboCop-style satirical ads ("Drink Quanta Cola, the energising drink with radioactive quanta extract"), the game possessed a subversive, cyberpunk edge. Imagine The Fifth Element crossed with Liberty City and a dash of Parisian red-light district Pigalle: among the supermarkets, temples and libraries are strip clubs populated by kabuki-faced pole dancers and sex shops crammed with dildos. The subversive quality seeps into the story too: starting out as a cop interrogating enemies of the state, you eventually join the resistance. One avatar's terrorist is another avatar's freedom fighter.

"There were many new ideas, probably too many," admits Cage. "I wanted to mix different genres but I wouldn't say we were 100 per cent successful." Seesawing between adventure game, RPG, firstperson shooter, 3D fighting game, and the odd bit of driving, *Omikron* was about ten games in one.

It didn't always work, not least the switches between third- and firstperson perspectives for the awkward shooting sequences. "I'm in the 15 per cent of people who can't play games in firstperson because I get sick," Cage explains. "Initially we wanted to have the shooting in thirdperson because firstperson gives me headaches and we didn't think it fit with the style of the game. But *Half-Life* was very successful at the time and Eidos really pushed for firstperson. I think it was a mistake."

Flawed as it might have been, it was flawed genius. Campbell, who'd later leave Eidos to join Quantic Dream as its chief creative officer, was among those who were wowed by Cage's vision. "I went out with him at E3 and got him drunk, worming my way onto the project," he recalls. "We invented an alter-ego for David, calling him 'Foggy.' It was primarily intended to start the cult of 'David Cage'!"

Designing the parameters of an open world wasn't easy. A lot of questions came up in development: would players be able to drive the game's taxis – 'sliders' – and use them to ram-raid shops or police mechs? Would they be able to start fist-fights with passers-by? Ultimately, none of those options was pursued and *Omikron*'s open world shipped mayhem-free – to the detriment of its potential profits. "Perhaps *GTA* got it right, at least from a commercial point of view," muses Campbell today.

For Cage, such concerns were trivial. Unlike Rockstar's anarchic mafia sandbox, *Omikron* maintained a rigid sense of itself as an emotional, ambitious epic. The problem was that an open world didn't lend itself to the demands of linear drama.

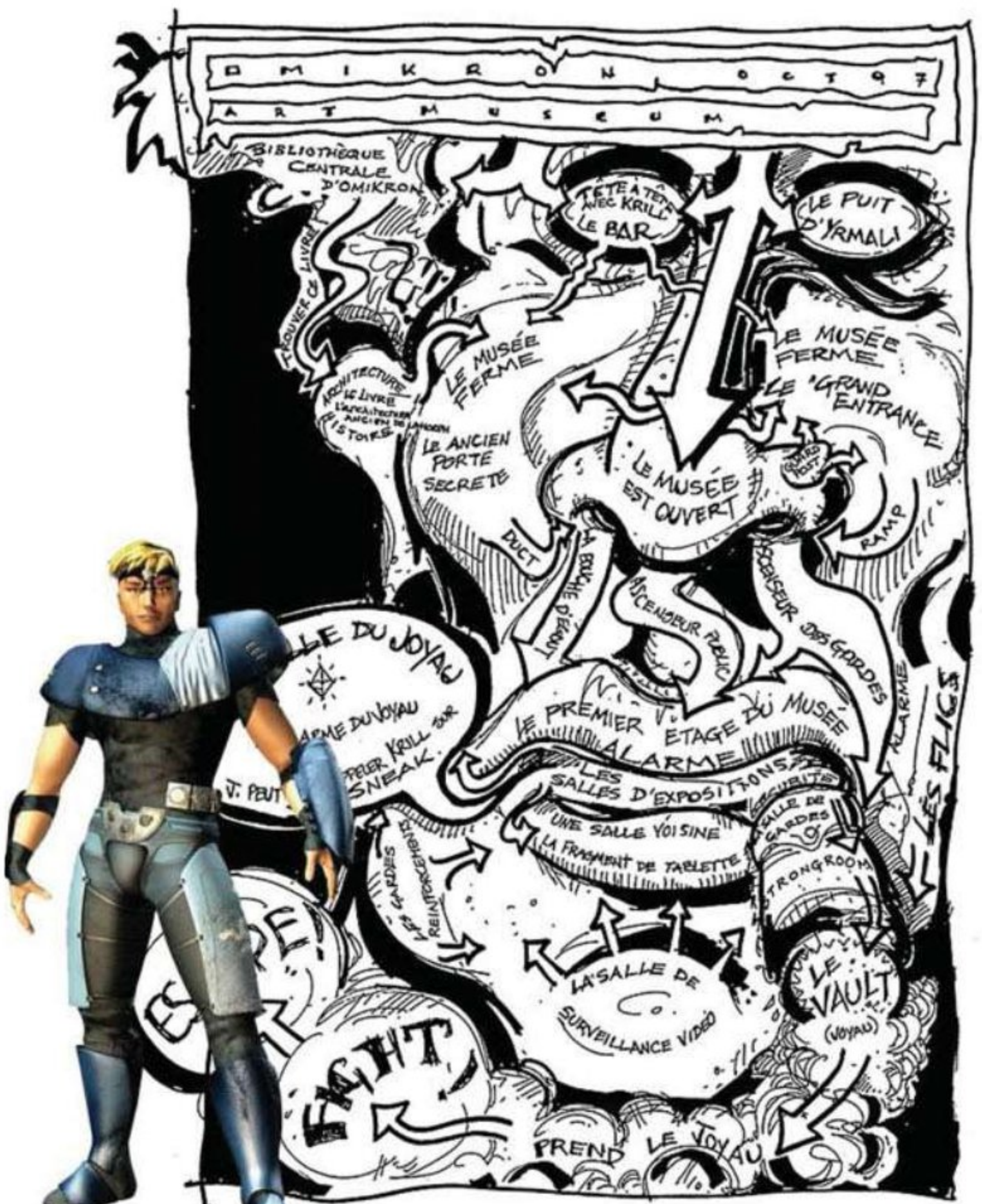
"It's very difficult to forge a real sense of narrative in an open world," the designer explains. "As a player you want to explore the world and drive around it but it destroys any sense of pace in the story. That was the first lesson from *Omikron*: if I want to tell a good story, I need to give more constraints to master the pace and rhythm of the narrative, otherwise the player can destroy it."

David Bowie didn't play videogames, but he knew a lot about virtual identities. He'd been Ziggy Stardust, The Thin White Duke and, once upon a time, just plain old David Jones. When he saw *Omikron*, he knew he wanted to be part of it.

MOOD MUSIC

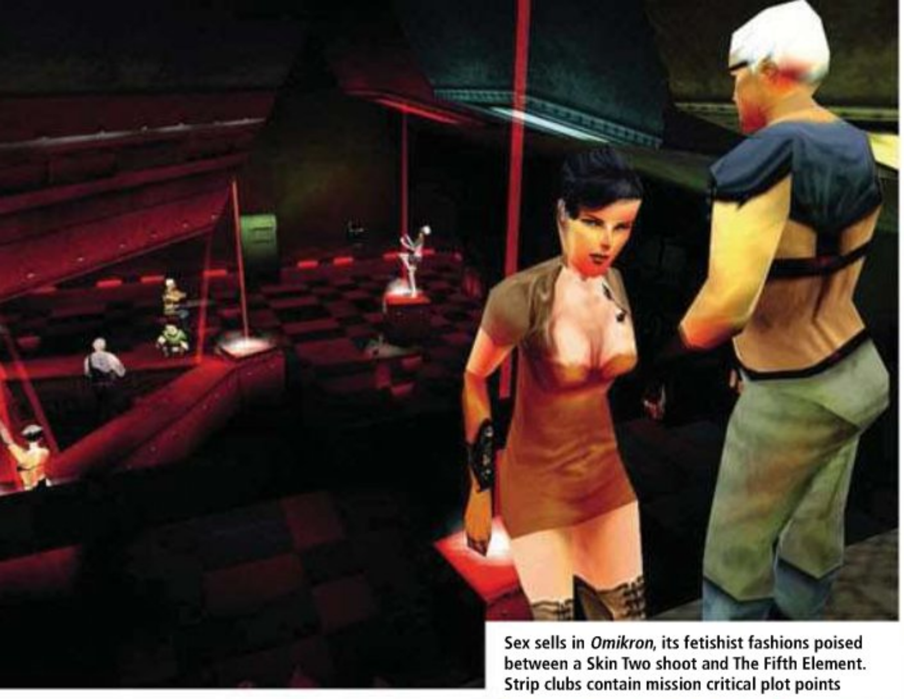
Opening with the soaring, fragile beauty of its theme song New Angels of Promise, *Omikron*'s soundtrack is a tour de force. Cage himself was stunned by Bowie's contribution. "I was expecting something really strange and unhealthy in the spirit of the graphics," he says, "but he gave us exactly the opposite based on guitar, piano and voice with a lot of melodies. It's something I've learned from him – to use the music not to repeat what's already in the image but to add something to it, expand what it says." For Bowie, staying away from the usual techno-industrial game sound was a deliberate ploy. "We wanted to create an emotional sound," he told Salon.com. "In *Omikron* it's your soul that's at stake – we wanted to make sure that your heart was playing along too."

"There were many new ideas, probably too many. I wanted to mix genres but I wouldn't say we were 100 per cent successful"



One of Phil Campbell's memorable early mission designs – for a jewel heist at Lahoreh's – was built around the face of David Cage. Cage liked it enough to offer Campbell a job

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Sex sells in *Omikron*, its fetishist fashions poised between a Skin Two shoot and The Fifth Element. Strip clubs contain mission critical plot points

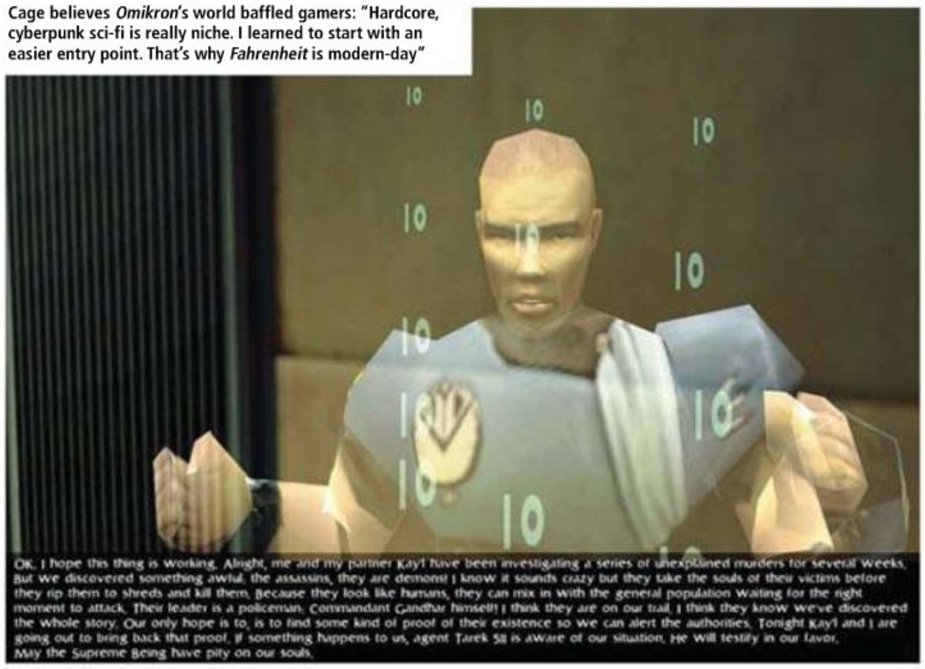




Cage believes *Omikron*'s world baffled gamers: "Hardcore, cyberpunk sci-fi is really niche. I learned to start with an easier entry point. That's why *Fahrenheit* is modern-day"



Playing digital being Boz (above) wasn't a stretch for Bowie. "It was about becoming another character," explains Cage. "That's been a theme in his career"



In early development Cage had scribbled down a list of artists he'd love to have compose the game's score. Björk, Massive Attack and fellow trip-hop band Archive were all on the shortlist. So was Bowie.

"We put him on there although no one thought we'd even be able to talk to him," laughs Cage. Instead, Bowie responded immediately to their approach and came to Eidos with his son, Duncan Jones, an avid gamer and the future award-winning director of Moon. Not just content with writing music for the game, Bowie wanted to inhabit the virtual space and offered his services. "I can see now how a game like *Omikron* can jolt you into an altered state – with few of those messy side effects!" he joked in an interview with Playboy. He contributed ten original songs to the game (see 'Mood music').

Bowie also spent a month in Paris, where Quantic Dream filmed him with the help of a French motion-capture studio. He played two parts – the youthful lead singer of The Dreamers, an underground band who held furtive concerts in the city's clubs; and the older Boz, a blue-skinned, digital entity who leads the resistance fighters.

"We wanted to capture Bowie doing his signature moves," recalls Campbell, a paid-up, lifelong member of the singer's fan club. "But he didn't think he really had any signature moves so he gave us his choreographer [Edouard Locke] and we captured him doing 'Bowie' routines." They also captured guitarist and regular Bowie collaborator Reeves Gabrels; the rest of the band members were hand-animated. Cage then spent 30 hours on each concert, filming the mo-capped avatars within the game engine using a virtual camera.

It was the first time a real-life performer had gigged inside a videogame, a decade before *GTAIV*'s comedy clubs. Bowie's dual role also tied into Cage's obsession with schizophrenic identities, something that was only underscored by the game's fluid shifting between avatars. Like *Fahrenheit* and *Heavy Rain*, *Omikron* experimented with the emotional potential of such perspective shifts.

Cage particularly liked the early moment when the player, occupying the body of policeman Kay'l, beds his wife. "The idea of being in the body of a guy and making love to his wife – when she believes you're her husband, even though you're not – was a very strange position to be in. That's exactly the kind of thing that I try to explore in all my games today. How can we put you in the shoes of someone else?"

Bowie, a legendary chameleon, totally understood the pleasures of the virtual realm and its Dorian Gray potential. He even roped in his wife Iman, who appears as a bodyguard. "He sometimes joked about leaving his Bowie character in *Omikron* forever," says Campbell. "He would have totally transcended to the digital side – and 'come out the other side' as just David Jones again."

For a game with such ambition, *Omikron*'s commercial fate was painful. "The titles I create seem to be too weird for the American marketing guys," says Cage. "In the US, Eidos didn't support the game at all, which was really disappointing. The big sales were mainly in Europe, where we sold between 400,000 and 500,000. It was too arty, too French, too 'something' for the American marketing department."

Omikron remains a key game in the evolution of open-world environments. Yet it also marked the arrival of a unique talent. "David Cage really is an auteur in the classic, French, Truffaut style," argues Campbell. "He has such a strong vision that's been there since day one." For his part, the designer believes *Omikron* is the genesis of everything he's done since. "The seeds of *Fahrenheit* and *Heavy Rain* are definitely in there," he says. "They were conceived in reaction to what I discovered making this game. I'm really proud of it but what I learnt making it was what made me decide to choose another way." Like *Omikron*'s nomad soul, Cage's restless creativity remains constant, whatever its host.



UNDER THE HOOD

So how did Cage's dream become a reality? Sadly lead programmer Fabien Fessard died suddenly in 2005 (aged just 33). "He did a great job driving the new tech that was put together," recalls his colleague Olivier Nallet, who was originally hired to lead the shelved PSX version ("like putting an elephant in a shoebox!") before joining the PC team. "We had to develop custom tools for the specific needs of *Omikron*. The main tool (IAM) was integrated with the 3D engine. It allowed us to associate scripts, triggers in real time, camera, etc. We had a dialogue editor, and we could test full sequences like the FPS and fight sections directly. The tech by itself was relatively rudimentary compared to, say, Unreal. However, we could customise it quickly to what we needed and that's what made it more powerful."

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Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Running in circles

Feeling lonely, animators? Neglected? Autodesk's Project Skyline wants to keep you in the loop



Eric Plante, Games Technology Group product manager, Autodesk

This certainly isn't the first time we've heard of animators' frustrations with their place in modern workflows. They can make poetry in motion with just a few looped frames of walking, running or jumping, but what happens in-game is often at someone else's mercy. Without the clairvoyance to see the blends – transitions, combinations, interpolations – that will put their work in context, they're effectively working blind. It's something Autodesk, having stepped into the middleware ring with some smart acquisitions and inventions, is determined to fix.

Debuted at this year's Game Developers Conference, Project Skyline is a set of authoring tools designed to show how modern workflow loops can, with the right expertise, include an area that's largely neglected: authoring.

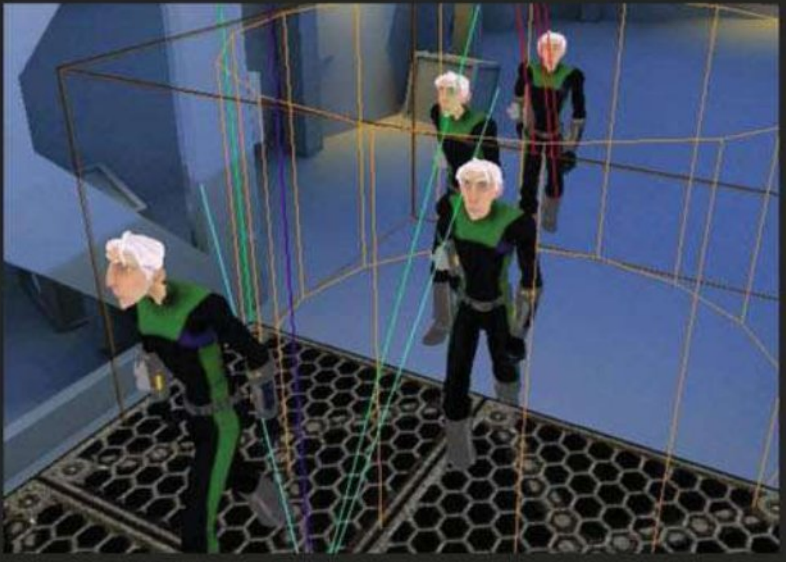
Eric Plante, product manager of its Games Technology Group, is one of several veteran game-makers who, prior to joining Autodesk, "saw a transition from… let's call them 'linear pipelines'. In a linear pipeline, what happens is that you build your source assets in 3ds Max,

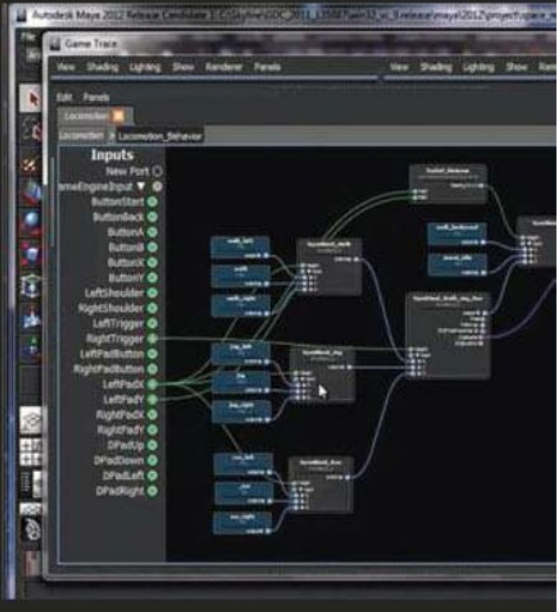


Skyline's applications aren't found just in character animation: 'path objects' such as doors, elevators and ladders – anything likely to be used by an NPC, basically – can be edited in the live environment

Maya or MotionBuilder. You export that out and bring it into what's typically an in-house solution to combine it into gameplay. In most cases, that happens in code or an XML file. Then you'll export the result, rebuild the data for the game, launch the game and look at what you've done. If it's not right, you take a guess at what went wrong and you go back."

The industry's response, 'closed-loop pipelines' that are typically developed in-house, allow development to occur in a running game engine and live environment. Sometimes this is a sandbox, sometimes it's an entire level.





The 'game trace' view (right) allows animators and their colleagues to combine animations while the game is being played, providing a potentially invaluable preview of animations in context



Live editing is nothing new, unless you're talking about fundamental changes to source assets. Here, those assets are animations updated constantly by a game engine



But as Autodesk strategically expanded its workforce and portfolio – with acquisitions such as Kynapse AI in 2008 and Illuminate Labs, creator of lighting middleware Beast, in July 2010 – it noticed something missing.

"These workflows never included the authoring part," says Plante. "So, to use animation as an example, it was all fine if you built a blend tree of animations and a blend was wrong. A sync-blend that turns a walk into a run, for instance, where the events weren't marked properly; those could be resolved live. But if the problem involved assets, you then had to drop out of that nice tight iteration loop. It just made sense that an authoring loop should include the actual authoring."

While it's yet to announce publicly if and when an actual product will emerge, Autodesk's GDC presentation consisted of authoring tools for Maya (an animation state editor, track view and clip editor), a middleware library that integrates with existing game engines, a node-based environment for building complex animations, and bi-directional 'live linking' technology that enables Maya and the middleware to exchange data without the need for recompilation or restarts.

Autodesk seems uniquely positioned to build bridges between its middleware and developers' engines



"Where this is really a game-changer is that it allows you to not just debug while you're connected live, it allows you to author while connected," says Plante. "So, you start with a T-pose and the game's running. One example in our little GDC script is that you have a walk animation and a jog, and we've got some turns but we don't have a run; whenever you push too far on the stick the character transforms into a T-stance. Then we import our run, start putting in key frames and the game just picks that up. As you're key-framing, you can move the character around and see how it makes sense with the rest of the animation set."

Developers, he explains, have been kept in the broader Skyline loop since an early stage. Its inception predates the acquisition of Beast and Illuminate Labs, but some late inspiration did indeed come from the eRnsT module of Beast, a live preview tool that enables users to interactively set up lights and tweak various lighting parameters. "There was some common thinking there," explains Plante, "but a lot of the inspiration came from our personal experiences and dealing with customers."

The GDC presentation hopes to include others in the feedback loop, though for now, Skyline's movements are firmly animation-based. "We saw this closed-loop workflow approach emerge and know it can be applied to other 'verticals', other domains of application," Plante agrees. "Animation was a good choice to test ideas on, and it would make sense to look at other verticals – but we're not talking about a complete game engine here. Many of our customers have internal engines as well."

With its background in making some of the industry's most prolific authoring tools, Autodesk seems uniquely positioned to build bridges between its tools and those developers' engines. But should Skyline materialise into something a little less airy, how many will feel they're ready to embrace its ideas? Plante concedes: "There's always inertia to overcome. It depends on the studio. Some have already made the transition and work this way. Others might have a very set pipeline that's well-oiled and they're used to, and this would be disruptive for them. I think, over the long term, everyone's going to be working this way, but each will have a right time to make that transition."

Making fun

With each announcement of new and acquired middleware, Autodesk's Digital Entertainment Creation initiative has increasingly promoted the use of its general art creation tools (3ds Max, Maya, Softimage, MotionBuilder and so on) with middleware such as Beast, HumanIK and Kynapse. Autodesk FBX, an open framework for 3D data transfer, seeks to increase the levels of interoperability between both these and thirdparty products. Whenever those efforts are rewarded with a high-profile client, the company has been sure to shout it from the heavens, the more recent including *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* and *EA Sports MMA*. A blossoming relationship with Epic, meanwhile, has seen features like FBX import added to the Unreal Development Kit.

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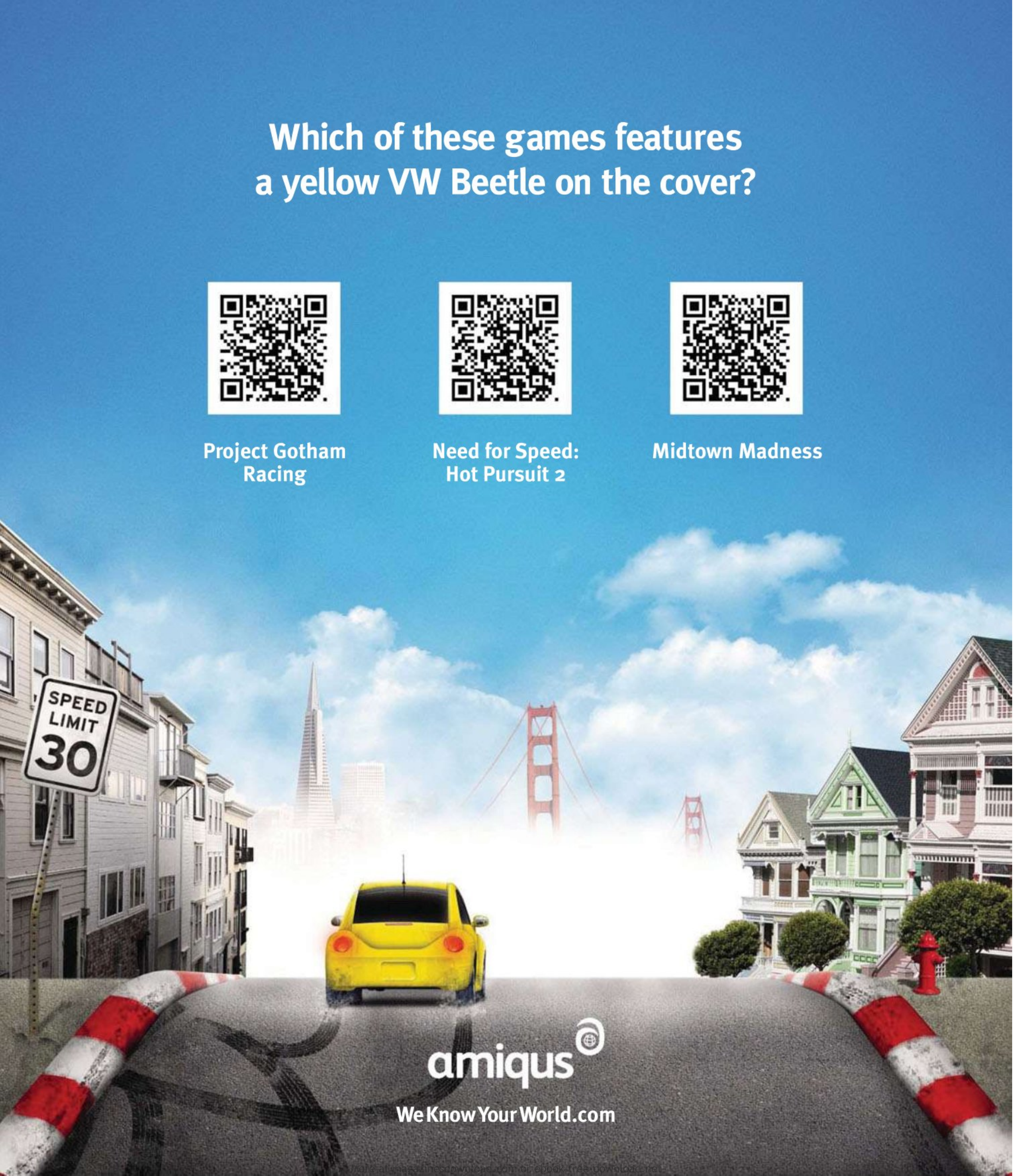
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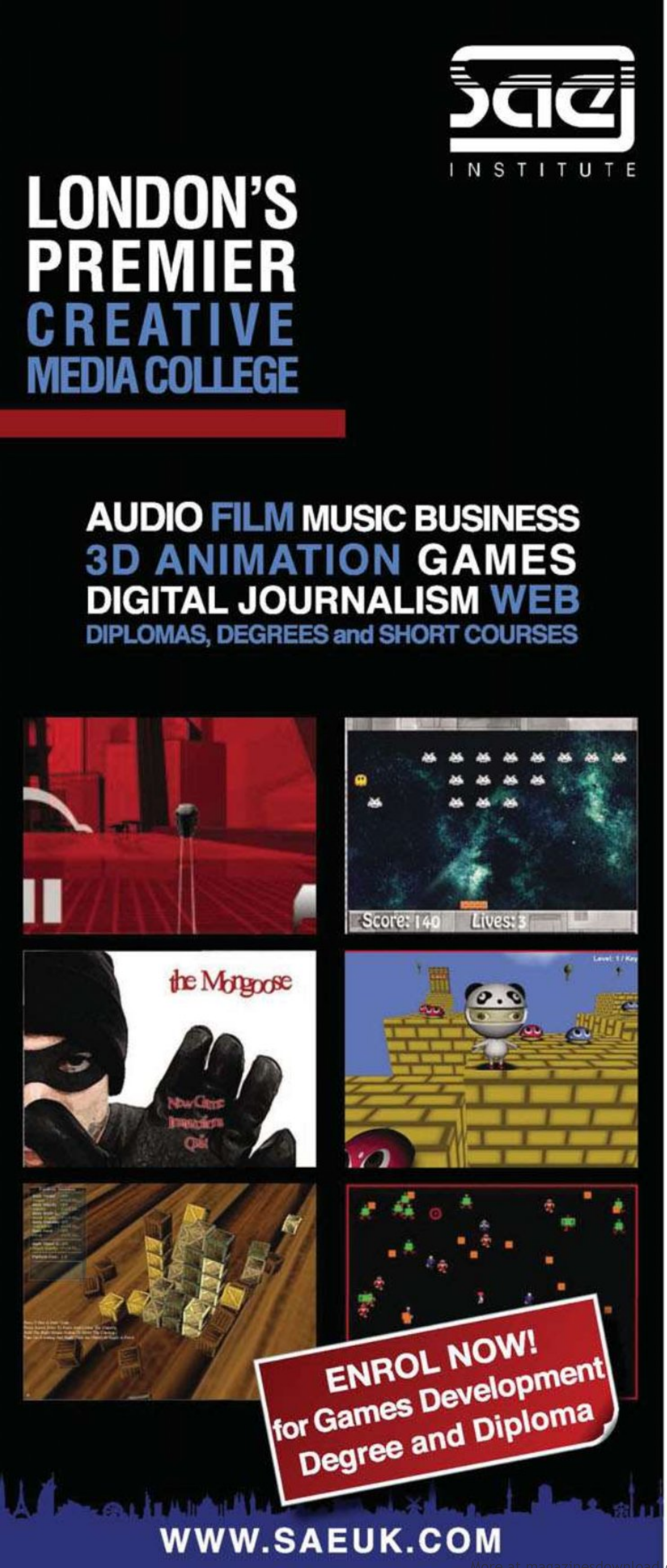
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BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING The elephants in the room

Part two: Viking development

Young men tend to behave in a fairly predictable fashion. It's easy to imagine what will happen if you take a group of 30 or 40 men in their teens and twenties, give them axes and beer, and make them row a longship out to sea for a few weeks in order to make a living.

There will be a lot of pent-up aggression. There will be a lot of fart jokes. When they finally reach land, they will cut loose – and if there's no strict rule of enforceable law where they come ashore, watch out. They will rape and pillage their way across the countryside, exhausting any easily consumable resources as they go, then get back into their longship and continue with their journey.

This is the model of Viking expansion that led to the Scandinavian kings controlling much of northern Europe a thousand years ago. Minus the literal rape and killing, of course, modern game development has a number of things in common with the Viking expansion. Specifically, game development studios and their teams are largely staffed in the same way that Viking longships were crewed. Consequently, the culture is overflowing with beer and pent-up aggression, and a very significant portion of our overall cultural output is fart jokes. I think we can do better.

> Game development is overflowing with beer and aggression, and a significant portion of our output is fart jokes. I think we can do better

What does "better" mean? Many people would argue that videogames are already a massively successfully, explosively growing, multi-billion dollar industry; what's better than that? I would counter that the Viking expansion was also massively successful, but that it never became the Viking Empire because it never learned how to be sustainable instead of expansionist – and as a consequence was toppled in 1066 by a better-balanced culture.

I believe that developing a better-balanced culture is the most important near-term step we can take towards nurturing a stable and truly massmarket audience. This is necessary to see us make the transition from an exploitative, expansionist industry to a sustainable one. Furthermore, I believe that the most important step we can take in balancing that culture is to bring more women into game development.

Some people are sure to interpret this as me saying that we need more female game developers so they can make more games for a giant, untapped market of female gamers that's waiting to be served. This is not at all what I mean. What I mean is that we need more female game developers in order to ensure that the development culture in game studios becomes more reflective of our culture at large. It's this overall culture that's the giant untapped market we need to serve: a rich and diverse mass market that's comprised of men and women, appreciating and consuming art and entertainment together.

How do we do this? Well, the first step is guaranteeing opportunity and pay equality for women. This isn't something that should be imposed or legislated by some outside body – but rather something that every existing developer and publisher should audit internally. And this isn't something we should do because it's the right thing to do morally – try selling that idea to the board – it's something we should do because it moves us closer to the goal of speaking to a broader audience. It increases our reach and profitability – and, subsequently, our sustainability.

The next step is to begin active and aggressive recruitment of female developers. This is a more difficult process, and likely requires some kind of organised industry-wide initiative. It's not just about trying to hire more female applicants or putting affirmative action policies in place. The problem isn't that we're discriminating against female applicants in favour of hiring men; the problem is the lack of female applicants. This means that we need to better position the industry as a desirable workplace, one in which female artists, designers, programmers and project managers would want to be employed. It involves reaching out to universities and colleges to help them attract more female applicants to their programmes, enabling us to benefit from a greater number of female graduates.

What about those of us who aren't presidents making the case to the board, who don't run studios or manage relationships with higher education institutions? What can we do? Like the Viking expansion itself, this transformation probably needs to be driven from the bottom up. Like it or not, the culture onboard your ships is the culture you're exporting. Fart jokes have their place in culture, but when fart jokes become your culture you have a problem.

I'm not suggesting that we stop making violent, fart-joke-infused, aggression-release-valve games for the aspirational Vikings among us. If we ever hope to make high-profile titles that are something besides that, however, we need to behave a little more each day as though we're seated at the family dinner table, rather than rowing the longship.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



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BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

The highs, mids and lows of play

If you consider gameplay in terms of making progress through the game, you find that it typically exists on multiple levels. A very crisp example is *Archon* or similar 'battle chess' variation. On the high level, you play chess. On the low level, you have action battles to determine which of two pieces is victorious.

Chess gameplay is 'higher' because actions here map on to large steps of progress toward winning the game. Battle gameplay is 'lower' because individual actions culminate in the resolution of the current battle, which can only result in as much progress as a single step on the high level. As we can see, in this notion of 'levels' of gameplay, higher levels are associated with broader concerns and lengthier steps of progress than lower levels. Another common differentiator is as follows: the high level is associated with 'strategy,' meaning how to win the war by choosing battles to fight, the mid level is associated with 'tactics,' meaning how to win the current battle by choosing which moves to attempt, and the low level is associated with 'execution,' meaning accomplishing the current moves successfully.

> What would a game be like if the player had lots of control over how the story played out, but very little over individual encounters?

Archon's two levels are very visibly distinct, essentially separate games connected with a thin thread. It is more common that multiple layers are integrated into the same mode of interaction. In *Black Ops*, regardless of whether the player is concerned with protecting the headquarters (high level), guarding a particular doorway (mid level), or tossing a grenade at an approaching enemy (low level), they are in the same engine with the same view and controls. In these examples, player input always maps on to low level actions: moving an avatar, using a weapon or tool, etc. There is no input that accomplishes mid or high level actions, e.g. no 'Increase research capabilities' or 'Defend HQ' button. Instead the player accomplishes higher level play through a series of lower level actions.

In this sense, the higher levels are the goals of the game and lower levels are their subgoals. As this demonstrates, gameplay does not always decompose neatly into three levels. The reality is typically messier, more stratified, and evolves as the player's goal chain gets simpler or more complex during the course of play. For example, if a player is attempting to complete a mission objective in *Thief* but decides they will need more water arrows to pull it off successfully, this will spawn a temporary goal tree under 'Complete Objective' whose head node is 'Collect Ammo' and which itself could be fairly complex before it completes and goes away.

However, the high/mid/low grouping often makes sense due to characteristics commonly found in each level. High levels are often characterised by designer-imposed rules about how the game is won (victory points in *Civilization*) or what happens as you proceed through the game (levels and story in *Thief*). The high level is frequently one-way progress; the player marches forward until the game is won. In comparison, the low level often appears chaotic and entirely under the player's control if seen from the perspective of any higher-level goal or structure. From moment to moment, the player might take any available action: jumping, shooting, switching inventory. The mid level is where we see the most ambiguity of authorship. The objectives of *Thief* and the scoring system of *Black Ops* are examples of designer-imposed mid-level structure, but in these games the player is given ample freedom to author their own sub-goals, as the *Thief* water arrow example illustrates. The mid level is also where we see the most structured repetition in games, as play here tends to arrange itself in loops. Mid-level loops are one of the more versatile and nuanced tools in game design, and I'll cover them further next month.

What is the purpose of this type of academic approach? Formal analysis can help us understand some common reasons game designs succeed or fail. If you are working on a risky, unconventional concept, it might be possible to apply these patterns to give your game more structure and your players a familiar sense of control and progress. They can also be referenced while generating new game ideas, although following the patterns too closely can result in 'paint by numbers' design, assuming there is no innovative kernel to wrap the structure around.

Formal analysis can also be used as a tool to generate experimental concepts when applied in a way that defies expectations. For example, it tends to be the case that players are given increasing flexibility as you proceed from high to low levels. What if this were shuffled? What would a game be like if the player had lots of control over the high level – how the story played out or something similarly unexpected – but very little control over the mid level, such as how individual encounters resolve? Does such a game already exist? Perhaps the player is giving orders on a mobile phone to a bumbling henchman? Turning these tools on their heads is a creative exercise that can produce the initial threads of interesting game concepts.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch



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BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Mastering the puppet

You're a slave to love, the grind, or '80s metal, sure – but are you also a slave to videogames? It's a familiar critique ("You're not playing the game; the game is playing you"), but one that seems increasingly to the point. Take the fashion for motion control. If you are sprawled at princely ease, pressing small buttons to achieve dramatic effects, then you are in command. By contrast, if you have to use your whole body as the controller, you are a slave, just in the way that slaves in the ancient world were valued to the extent that they were bodies from which a certain amount of physical work could be extracted before their unmourned demise.

The Wii or Kinect or Move system dilutes one of the core pleasures of videogaming: amplification of input, the translation of tiny physical actions into complex or forceful virtual performance. Lara Croft, or that bland-faced sociopath who is the 'hero' of *Uncharted*: they are your puppets, performing impressive acrobatics for little cost of effort on your part; but if you had to imitate all their actions physically, you would be just as much a puppet as they are. Think of Jack Black in the Orange cinema advert, suspended on Lilliputian strings: "I don't wanna do this dance! I don't wanna do this dance!" Well, I don't want to do that dance either.

In another way, it must be admitted that we are all slaves to (or in developed game economies, employees of) the Big Boss, the overarching design of a game that hauls us from one place to the other and decides how everything will end. So is it really a coincidence that the theme so many games, as well as a repetitive mechanic, is that of escape? Escape from a prison or a dungeon or an asylum; escape from one level or world to the next; escape from this arbitrarily locked area once you have defeated the achingly tedious monster that the designers, presumably drunk, thought it would be more 'fun' to fight if you had to hit its weak point 3,000 sodding times.

> "We smash our way out of this system of brutal entertainment. The reward for finishing a game is, finally, that you can turn it off"

Yes, our favourite escapism is escapology. *Dead Nation*'s core delirious challenge is to escape from one part of a confined space to another while hundreds of zombies try to eat you, and then to escape to the next checkpoint and gun shop. *LittleBigPlanet 2*'s ready-made levels are nothing more than a series of pretty escapes. Most of the time, we are not so much adventuring or exploring as just trying to get the hell out. It is as though games are sympathetically acknowledging and gently satirising our plight as players, voluntarily enslaved in an imaginary prison. We are encouraged to be a million little Spartacuses, smashing our way out of the system of brutal entertainment that has become our home. The reward for finishing a game is, finally, that you can turn it off.

The genre that dramatises this paradox most effectively is the locked-room puzzler (or 'room escape game'), as exemplified by a cult-classic quadrilogy from the middle of the last decade: Toshimitsu Takagi's *Crimson Room*, *Viridian Room*, *Blue Chamber* and *White Chamber*. Simple point 'n' click Flash games, they have the feel of weird short stories, expertly combining the mundane (a near-featureless hotel room; a white office that seems to be in an underground car-park) with the eerie. The sense of unease is even enhanced by the not-quite-perfect English of the text: the second game begins by announcing, starkly: "Successfully getting out of CRIMSON ROOM, you called yourself 'ESCAPER.' But, a person cannot escape from oneself."

The player of these games is certainly enslaved, obliged to perform demeaning tasks such as pixel-hunting for the tiny patch on the screen that will open a new perspective or uncover a hidden device, and only ever able to combine objects in the one way that the designer has chosen beforehand. You only get out, in the end, because he lets you – and even then it might be a trick.

These crude clickers boast nothing of what we celebrate in modern videogaming: freedom, large toysets, emergent complexity and the rest. But it is worth being made to think about how open 'openness' really is by playing games that are so suffocatingly, claustrophobically closed. The one dimension along which you are free in these games (with the exception of a single puzzle that has become notorious) is time: there is plenty of time to look around and think, to solve the ingenious memory and number puzzles, and to meditate on the creepy feeling that you are not just accidentally locked in a room; you have been deliberately trapped there, along with the tools to get out, by an alien intelligence that is enjoying watching you squirm.

At least *Crimson Room* and its successors make it absolutely clear where you stand: you are a prisoner and a slave. In all too many other games, you might be both without knowing it.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net



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BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

When good enough isn't good enough

When we think of the first and fourth quarters of the year from a gaming perspective, we think of a period when many of the year's most successful or most acclaimed games are released. But for the past several years, it's also been a time of course correction, where publishers shed employees and close studios – and the most recent six-month period has proven no exception.

From Viacom selling off Harmonix, to Activision cancelling *True Crime*, shuttering its *Guitar Hero* division and laying off 500 employees, the 'right-sizing' of the console and PC game industry proceeds unabated. Publishers continue to wrestle with rising costs, the increasing dominance of a handful of franchises and the shifting of occasional gamers towards social and mobile games.

Meanwhile, at February's DICE (Design Innovate Communicate Entertain) conference in Las Vegas, game design guru Mark Cerny delivered a talk titled The End of Death, the Crash of 1982 and Other Topics. It was an interesting presentation, in part because rather than take the customary tack of comparing a downturn in the present to the collapse of the console market in 1983, Cerny instead looked at the crash of the arcade market a year earlier.

> Publishers and developers know that only a handful of franchises can become platforms for healthy sales at their initial retail price

What went wrong? According to Cerny, the market had become saturated with arcade machines. This forced designers to create more elaborate games and cabinets to stand out from their competitors. However, these machines were also more expensive, which in turn meant that arcade operators had to raise the cost of each play. The newer games were also more complicated, which further alienated casual players.

Cerny didn't claim that the situation was precisely analogous to what publishers and developers are currently facing – thanks to the Wii Remote, Move, Kinect and the DS's touchscreens, dedicated gaming systems are more accessible than they've been in years. But years of escalating budgets have caused him to question the sanity in creating games that cost tens of millions of dollars at a time when only 60 games have sold more than one million units. As he saw it, games have become like movies, where the once-ridiculed price tag for 1995's Waterworld is now merely the entry price for a summer blockbuster.

From Cerny's perspective, the only solution is for publishers and developers to take advantage of the current quiet period that comes as a result of a delayed transition to new hardware, and rein in costs. In theory, it's sound advice. In practice, however, we don't see the budgetary arms race disappearing anytime soon. Publishers and developers know that only a handful of franchises can become platforms for healthy sales at their initial retail prices, grow and maintain a substantial online community, and sell thousands upon thousands of units of downloadable content.

Singleplayer successes such as *BioShock*, *Uncharted* and *Assassin's Creed* have had to incorporate substantial multiplayer modes into the base game and DLC, while a multiplayer-only franchise *Battlefield* had to add a robust campaign mode to justify its price tag. The *Call Of Duty* games have strong coop modes, as does *Red Dead Redemption*. Because each of these IPs has a large audience, their backers can justify tactical overspending to make it harder for their competitors to, well, compete.

This is definitely true for established franchises such as *Call Of Duty*, for which Activision can rationalise increasing the number of studios that work on the brand and running TV ads in June for a game that ships in November. But it's also true for upstarts such as *The Old Republic*, whose use of fully voiced characters and NPCs over text will help set it apart from its rivals. The level of quality and scope that Ubisoft is able to bring to *Assassin's Creed* on an annual basis has made it one of the few non-Rockstar blockbusters in the tough-to-break-into open world game category. During the earnings call in which Activision announced the cancellation of *True Crime*, publishing CEO **Eric Hirshberg** stated, "Even our most optimistic internal projections show that continued investment wasn't going to lead to a title at, or near, the top of the competitive open-world genre. In an industry where only the best games in each category are flourishing, to be blunt, it just wasn't going to be good enough."

In other words, good enough isn't good enough anymore. Fewer titles, bigger bets – this is the modern mega-publisher's conservative recipe for success – or at the very least, for survival. The traditional portfolio is unlikely to be the norm, when money spent on marginal concepts and riskier ideas could be doubled on surer bets. The danger is that if everyone follows this path, where will the next *Wii Fit* or *Guitar Hero* come from to blaze the trail for entirely new categories of gaming? It's at times like these that survival and mutually assured destruction look virtually indistinguishable.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



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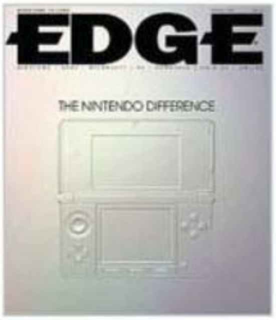
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Inbox



Issue 225

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: Is hacking always such a bad thing?

It's tantamount to terrorism, if you ask me
equinox_code

I used to play a version of *Wolfenstein 3D* that was modded. It had a super jump and a few other things. The thing was everyone knew what they were getting, and it was brilliant. In that situation a game being modded or hacked is brilliant. The problem with console gaming is that not everyone's in on the fun. If people do it to cheat then it's not cool in the slightest.
ScotsWahey

Modding is awesome. Hacking is not.
djchump

Hacking did give Chun-Li a fireball, so it's not all bad.
Bogard

I would like to comment on, and slightly disagree with, Steven Poole's opinion (**E**225) that traditional portable gaming consoles are losing out to modern smartphones, mainly on account of the swanky new operating systems of the latter.

I actually agree more with the opinion he sidelined earlier in his article, namely that 'the best mobile gaming machine is the one you always have with you'.

The fate of traditional portable gaming consoles was sealed when convergence started kicking in. The moment mobile phones became capable of more than just making calls and hosting monochrome versions of *Snake* was the point at which they spent more and more time in people's hands rather than their pockets. Modern phones do so much these days, whereas portable gaming consoles only really do one thing really well, and even that advantage is starting to disappear now that Apple's platform is hosting games of *Infinity Blade*'s caliber.

Sure, the new 3DS will help Nintendo sensationally buck the trend for a good while longer, for obvious reasons, but in the near future one device will do everything and I fear it will be analogous to a 'phone'.

It's been on the cards for a while. I remember purchasing the PS2 because it played games and DVDs (bargain!), and only eventually purchasing an Xbox because it hosted *Halo: Combat Evolved*. The only reason I have a PS3 as well as an Xbox 360 is because the PS3 plays Blu-rays.

I have to admit that if I had an iPhone I would definitely ignore my iPod, and probably begin to neglect my beloved DS Lite. And when the day comes when one powerful, fully converged, portable device with a bucketload of interfaces plugs into my telly and matches traditional consoles I will probably, sadly, ditch them as well.
David Wallwork

Sounds like a glorious future to us, even if we worry that convergence might undermine the quality of individual features. But it's already happening: as Microsoft ventures further into mobile, it's clear gaming's big players are positioning themselves to exploit greater connectivity.



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

Gaming would be better for all of us if the people who make and sell us games knew a little bit more about us, not just those of us with mismatched socks

Moan, moan, moan – more letters, more grievances. Wouldn't it be nice if moaners also offered workable solutions to their gripes? I'm colour-blind and propose that gaming would be better for all of us if the people who make and sell us games knew a little bit more about us – all of us, that is, not just those of us with mismatched socks.

As someone who works pretty hard to find out stuff about my customers (I sell stuff for a living), I'm frequently staggered at how little interest Xbox Live shows in what I want. The Xbox Live dashboard is chock-full of stuff that they're trying to sell me – and it's so scattergun, isn't it? An infinite number of monkeys sit at an infinite number of typewriters and pump my screen full of toss that I'm not interested in. They could be working smarter and selling me more stuff and making the stuff I buy better. I win, they win. Moreover, if they identify a flaw that's spoiling a pre-existing game for a section of us, they can patch it and tell us they've done so.

Take *Hexic* as an example. A cursory glance at my playing habits will show that I played the arse out of *Hexic*, didn't get past a certain level, and certainly didn't buy the sequel. If they had some basic data about me they could cross-reference it with my playing habits (along with the gazillions of other users) and see a mile off that a significant number of colour-blind gamers seemed to enjoy the game to a point (there is a colour-blind mode, but it's fatally flawed), and then don't buy the sequel.

Compare and contrast with *Peggle*'s excellent colour-blind mode which led to me buying the upgrade as soon as I could. Now project that trend across the seven to ten per cent of men (and it's men who predominantly drive game sales) with colour vision issues. Worldwide, that's a lot of money, no? Developers could have a basic feedback section in the options menus of their games – I could have told Infinity Ward about all the times I got berated and kicked by teammates for trying to shoot down my team's helicopter because I

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couldn't tell if it was red or green on the mini-map.

Microsoft could put out a simple, consensual questionnaire with some little carrot or other attached to find out some basic info. This could even be part of the sign-up process. They could then establish what proportion of their userbase are (for example) colour-blind, parents, left-handed, gay, etc.

Leaving the colour-blindness aside, players of abandoned games could be messaged when bugged games have been patched. For example, if Lionhead ever mends *Fable 2*'s glitchy The Rescue mission (and I actually heard about it), I'd probably buy the expansion packs or even the third game.

It's not that I desperately want to be marketed to by Microsoft or anyone, but I'm sure that a) they're missing a trick by not paying attention, and b) I'm sure that better games (or maybe just more considerately made games) would come of it.
Roy Ward

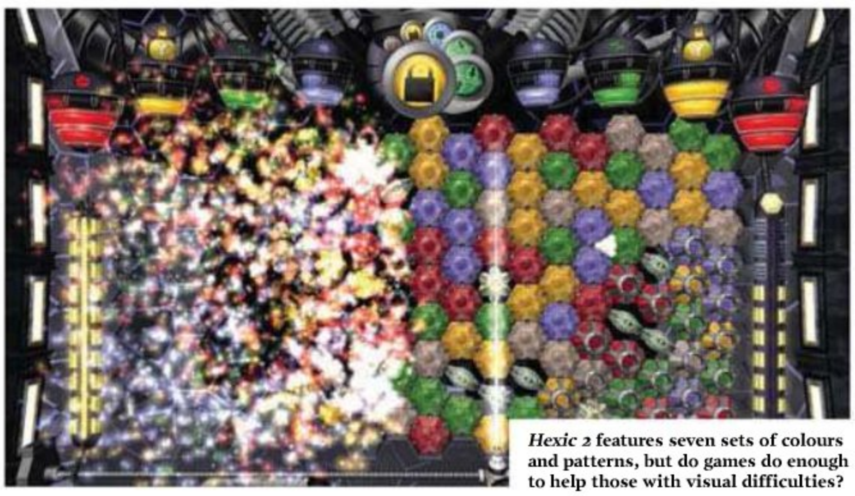
It's true that the 360 dashboard would be altogether more useful if there was some way of better tailoring its content. But do you really want Microsoft's marketing department to know your sexual preferences? This assumes both that your identity can be reduced to a few cold metrics and that sales people would use them responsibly. Point taken about colour blindness, though. Here's a DSi XL for your troubles (it's red, by the way). How's that for feedback?

I am writing in response to Clint Hocking's column in **E**225. He makes a fair point about how talented workers in the game industry are, and how they should not just be perceived as 'nerds'. I agree that time management and communication skills are now a necessity for those at the forefront of game design due to the large scale and hundreds of employees working towards a common goal in unison.

The Last Express is not only 'the best game most gamers have never heard of', it's also the best try at the now-discounted interactive movie genre

However, he mistakenly suggests that pharmaceutical and energy industry executives are 'dirtbags'. This, I feel, goes against idea of the column to eliminate the stereotypes aimed towards a specific industry, by levelling stereotypes against others. As a chemist working on the next generation of solar cells, I can assure you that a great deal of these dirtbags' time and money is being utilised for preparing the future of our planet. I believe that many who look at the games industry don't always think about the cutthroat business sense that is employed, just as it is in a pharmaceutical industry that has to back the drugs it thinks will both make money, and be in demand, to make our lives longer and better.
Ian Hancox

You make a fair point. No one would want to tar all energy execs with the same brush – we've seen what that stuff does to birdlife. Rest assured, Clint's been packed off on an equality and diversity course on the Deepwater Horizon to see what a sterling job is being done to safeguard our future.



Hexic 2 features seven sets of colours and patterns, but do games do enough to help those with visual difficulties?

Topic: Dara Ó Briain interview

I've gone for an interview for a job so that I can supplement my self-employed income, and I was told not to mention that I play videogames...

This completely baffles me, I simply cannot understand why it is frowned upon so much?
PermiaN

Would you, say, mention that you were really into watching TV, celebrity gossip magazines and the like either?

Even though they aren't frowned upon in the same way they hardly make you sound interesting/sociable and aren't good interview fodder. Depending on the job, naturally.
JB

What I don't understand is why people don't realise the reason for gamers to be thought of as weird. For a start, any minority 'hobby' will be considered a bit strange by anyone not involved (trainspotting, anyone?), plus the general public can't seem to handle 'different'. I'm a biker in my mid-40s with long hair, and lots of people can't seem to handle a male with long hair, and men have been wearing hair long for longer than there have been videogames.

Add to that that we are playing *games* (considered by the unknowing as a child's pastime) and it's easy to see why we are considered weird.
Lurch666

When did gaming revert back to being a minority hobby?
wonderbanana

Funnily enough I actually did mention in my job interview (for a software developer role) that I play quite a lot of videogames (I've been working here now for three years). I think I went off on a spiel about how it demonstrates my problem solving/lateral thinking skills – I said all this off the top of my head as I actually believe it to be true!
dungavin

Thanks for the retrospective on *The Last Express*, which brought back fond memories of playing it.

TLE is not only 'the best game most gamers have never heard of', it's also the best try at the now-discounted interactive movie genre, with a plausible period plot with alternative endings that all play out logically, characters whose intentions can be inferred from the national stereotypes they portray, genuine facial expressions that even with crude rotoscoping communicate better than any number of polygons, and puzzles set and solved with real-world items than actually make sense to carry around as inventory.

However, its failure may have been more self-inflicted than your article suggests. My own research left me feeling that something of Hollywood's excesses of ego and payroll-padding had crept into the production process: the credits list over 300 names, and I seem to remember the principal 3D designer saying he only found out there was a 3D art director to report to after he had completed all the 3D work himself!

The code was designed to only read data files from the CD-ROMs — the Mac version could be 'persuaded' to use a hard drive, but not everyone had 2GB spare back then — and handled the inadequate CD read speeds of the time by dropping intermediate animation frames, while a custom disc changing routine was just looking for trouble – and sometimes found it.

Replay value (other than alternative branches in the initial playthrough) is also compromised, because the scripting engine can be confused if you use foreknowledge to move faster than it expects, and at least one event

Continued

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is fudged to avoid branching. Nonetheless, the game remains solid evidence for the argument that better scripts and less photorealism is the way to create videogame 'art'.

More interesting would be Mechner adopting modern performance-capture technology to revisit Robert Cath and company in *The Thirteenth Tribe* (trailed in *TLE*'s finale, in which the rear carriage of the train, and Prince Kronos, are carefully not blown up as in the other ending) or some other sequel.
Dave Lockwood

In response to Alex Shedlock's letter in **E**224 about the monetary requirements of many MMOGs, I would like to suggest that he consider trying the ageing king of all MMOGs. I am of course referring to *Ultima Online*, but specifically the 'free shards'. To explain in brief: years ago, the source code for *UO* was accidentally released, clever people got hold of it and created entirely legal emulations of the original game. There are now dozens of free shards (servers) operating under different rulesets dating from different eras of *UO*'s history. You generally don't pay for these free shards, but they operate a donation system whereby you can exchange real-life cash for in-game items. The servers are entirely playable without ever donating a penny, donations typically resulting in luxury items like clothing, and the occasional useful thing like a powerful pet.

Ultima Online is especially awesome because it is not *World Of Warcraft*. It isn't trying to copy *WOW*; it isn't plagued with the horrible levelling system of pretty much every modern MMOG; you aren't divided into factions; you can communicate with every other player in the game; you can find PVP everywhere instead of being confined to an arena or battleground; the goalposts aren't moved every six months as someone drip-feeds you new content to maintain subscriptions; and it isn't bogged down in a nerf/buff cycle for certain playstyles.

It may be 14-going-on-15 years old, but in my (quite probably biased) view it is still the best online game in existence.
Jack Rowan

We're more than eager to see MMOGs diverge from *WOW*'s template – but sometimes you really do get what you pay for. *UO*'s charms aside, for many, *WOW* will be the only game they'll ever need to buy. And isn't the drip-feed of content a boon, not a burden?

F

Topic: Dara Ó Briain interview (continued)

I remember seeing this in a newspaper: recruitment agencies specifically getting instructions from employers that they didn't want *WOW* players. Apparently they all stay up 'til four in the morning playing it, and turn up at work shattered. I think there's this stereotype still pervading a lot of people's thoughts about it.
monkeyGod

Consciously or subconsciously, people get that gaming isn't watching or reading or listening – that it is an active, interactive, pastime – and they realise online gaming – maybe through their children – is a form of communicating and/or socialising. So they ask: why don't you go out to do stuff [instead of doing stuff virtually], why don't you meet real people and real friends [instead of talking to people online]? Subconsciously, people get that games are something more than the other pastimes and they feel threatened by them and describe it pejoratively.
Dr Gonzo

While I would always list more respectable/tolerable hobbies and activities first on my CV and job applications, I nevertheless always mention videogames at some point. For my current job, I had to answer lengthy questions at several points on handling stress, and videogames featured heavily in my answers there. Never got a moment's resistance from interviewers.
adkm1979



EA mothballed *Mirror's Edge 2* after *ME1*'s 'poor' sales. A sad case of business trumping creativity?

I am getting increasingly worried about the state of gaming. It feels like the market is reaching critical mass, with more and more games coming out that have cost a terrific amount of money during development – only to be greeted with general indifference. With the recent announcements that *Enslaved* and *Mirror's Edge* were relative 'flops' and won't be receiving sequels, the well-publicised collapse of *APB*'s developer, not to mention the speed with which games seem to drop in price, all I can think is that this situation is unsustainable.

Activision has already put the brakes on anything which isn't bringing home the bacon, with widescale culling of once-beloved IPs (eg, *Tony Hawk*, *Guitar Hero*). Undoubtedly, other publishers will follow in Bobby Kotick's footsteps. With an increasing aversion to risk comes a gradual homogenisation of gaming into a few, proven genres, with chances on new gametypes and mechanics only being taken by indies in downloadable titles.

This at a time when technology is so far advanced that we should be seeing an explosion of creativity in gaming as devs are more able than ever to express their visions and not be bound by the limits of the hardware.

My concerns were echoed by industry veteran Mark Cerny (*Marble Madness*) during his discussion at DICE 2011, when he stated that the industry must start restricting budgets and focus on working within more sustainable limits if it is to survive the coming storm.
Ash Smith

You're not the only one to worry about a narrowing of the top end of the market (see p124). But, though studio closures are always regrettable, perhaps we should welcome the reassessment of perennial series like *Guitar Hero* and *Tony Hawk* – maybe, one day, we'll have had enough of *Call Of Duty*, too.

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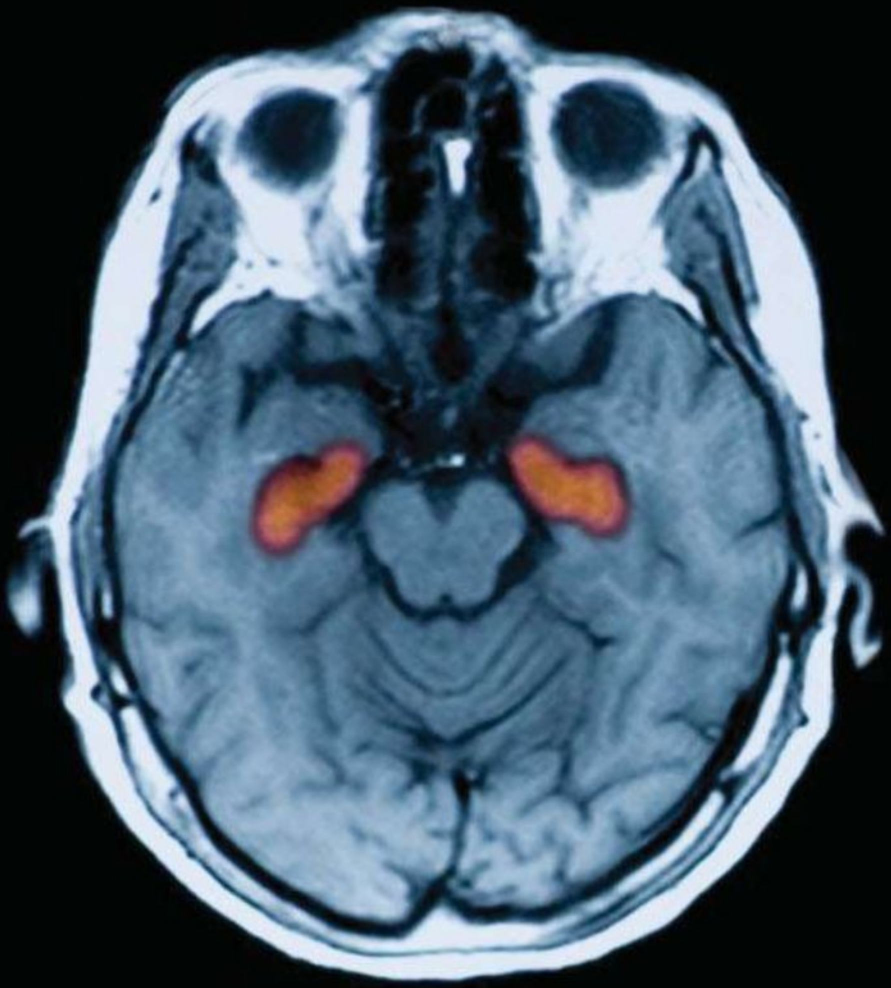
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